This Town Will Never Let Us Go

Lawrence Miles

Faction Paradox

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All characters portrayed in this novel are fictitious. However, the author would like to make it clear that all the major presences described here (from red Mercury upwards) are real, and that none of the procedures featured in this story are wholly imaginary.

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0. Midnight

0.00 All Journeys Begin Here

Clearly, this is one of *those* worlds. Or maybe it's just one of those nights that makes it look like one of those worlds. The television's the give-away.

The stopover is the kind of place that's open all-night—no, all-*nite*—and knows that it has to appeal to the kind of person who will, logically, have been driving all-nite. The fuel pumps are out on the forecourt, but on the inside it's going for that "oasis" feel. (Not that a genuine oasis would have chiller cabinets, notes Inangela, who's even now leaning against a locker that houses exotic cold-meat products in exotic polythene jackets. But there are certain things you expect from an oasis, and *coolness* is one of them.) On the inside everything's neon-white, and neon-bright, and neatly tiled and ordered, and only the chocolate bars seem too indiscreet to be tempting. The rest of this place is cold, serene and angelic. The chocolate shouts in Eastmancolour. There are bloody red-wrapper messages spelled out across the food-racks.

The stopover hums with electricity, the kind that says "safety," not "storm." The television's turned up slightly too loud, but the sounds are reassuring. The screen hangs from a bracket behind the cash-counter, so the one forsaken-looking clerk has to turn his back on any potential customers if he feels the need to watch it. Inangela's been staring at it for some time now, while her companion surfs the aisles, putting together a natural history of all the snackfoods.

A *bestiary* of snackfoods.

Yes. For all of them are, as Inangela well knows, daemons of one kind or another.

The programme is a repeat, obviously, probably broadcast on one of many, many late-night-kitsch satellite stations. '70s retro is the baseline of all human culture after midnight. The Muppets are getting ready to perform their final musical number of the evening, so all the big players are assembling on the stage, the frog and the pig and the bear and the other one (and Inangela—who knows altogether too much about this sort of thing—nearly has to bite her own flesh to stop herself pointing out to the world that in any good alchemical sequence, the last of the four beasts is always unknown and represents an unidentifiable mystery animal… *stop it stop it stop it, you're tired and you need wake-up pills or you're never going to get through the next few*

hours).

Five minutes ago, or maybe ten, or maybe fifteen, she was squinting at the screen and trying to work out who the celebrity guest is on this particular show. The token sacrificial human, an old, sad, beaten-looking man, evidently trying to enjoy his time with these colourful puppet-breeds but realising they represent a world he no longer understands. Kermit the Frog described it as a 'great honour' to have him in the studio. Inangela finally identified him—shakily, it's got to be said—as George Orwell. She vaguely recalls that when she first walked into the stopover, the Muppets were in the middle of a comedy re-enactment of the Room 101 scene from *1984* starring Rizzo the Rat. Or at least she *thinks* she remembers that, but she could be retro-imagining it.

Limited kitsch appeal. Kids today barely know the Muppets and don't have a clue about great English authors. Inangela considers herself to be one of the Chosen.

'I had a boyfriend who liked me to pretend to be Miss Piggy,' says Horror, as she scoots past Inangela with a pepperoni-stick in her hand.

0.01 Animal Parts

This is funny, for a reason which is nearly-but-not-really cruel. It'd be going too far to say that Horror is *fat*, exactly. She's not precisely slim, it's true, but she's got the kind of body that allows her at least half a dozen good excuses. "Vodka retention" is the one Inangela likes best. "Unusually wide bone marrow" is another one, although the last time Horror herself tried to use it she was so drunk that it sounded entirely serious (a frequent risk, when you've rehearsed your wit in advance) and it was just embarrassing to watch.

But the night's getting hotter. Air-conditioned as the stopover might be, outside there's a super-heated wind blowing through the one-way systems and bus lanes. Hot rain expected before the dawn. Inangela may have insisted on the archetypal leather for her coat, but above the waist Horror isn't wearing anything but a sleeveless t-shirt and numerous piercings. This means that her arms are exposed for all the world to see, and Horror's arms just happen to be exactly the same colour as the skin-fabric of a Muppet pig. Only the slight freckling ruins the illusion.

Inangela doesn't snigger, when Horror mentions her pig-obsessed former boyfriend, because she's got other things on her mind and it's hard enough to focus already. She's trying to remember when George Orwell died. It's funny, but she always thought it was the early '50s. In which case the TV station is taking "retro" that one step too far.

'Hi-*yah*,' says Horror, aiming a fake karate chop in Inangela's direction.

0.02 Night, Under Fire

The first of the night's rocket attacks (and the word "rocket" is, as ever, used loosely here… *anything* that causes such large amounts of property damage is to be designated either a "rocket attack" or a "terror attack," although the method by which the distinction's made is open to debate) began at exactly 11:38 pm, in one of the many, many town squares which all hope to qualify as the town square. This particular square is, or was, well-known for having more hot food stalls than any other, which might explain why Inangela was there just before the attack began. On this occasion, most of the citizenry in the square—the teenagers perfecting the art of being-nowhere-in-particular, and the stall-holders who'd begun to melt into the atmosphere of hot grilling fat just like salami melts into cheese—somehow managed to stay clear of the flying glass, the building-

shrapnel and even the blast point itself. The stalls were less lucky. Inangela imagines them as casualties of war, broken and gasping on the battlefield, breathing out meat-flavoured steam as they die.

You have to bear in mind that if there's one word to describe the War, it's *spurious*. Which is to say: There is a logic to it, but it's a logic so complex that no matter how hard you try, you can never summon up the will to follow every precise detail. Or even enough just to comprehend its shape. What's important is that the town itself isn't the target. The town's of no great value, and as far as anyone's been able to ascertain it serves no strategic function. But some things exist by the strength of their own will, and this is the *War*, a War so fundamental that it can only ever be described in the singular.

The explosions you hear in the distance, the urban craters that smell of liquid accelerant and burning burger-fat… they're signs, that's all. The marks the War leaves in the dirt. Nobody would seriously ask why the rockets should target a square full of fast-food stands, or even why the missiles should be heading this way at all. It's really very simple: *This is the War*. And what else should the War do?

Inangela is, however, sorry things have turned out this way. Now she'll never get hold of a decent fried malmiotti wrap ever again, and if there's one thing guaranteed to make people turn against the War, it's that kind of inconvenience.

0.03 Inangela

What Inangela Marrero sees, when she wakes up in the morning (or, more commonly, in the afternoon) and looks in the mirror:

A girl—quite specifically a girl, nothing as mundane as a *woman*, even though she's at that difficult age where the TV news wouldn't be certain which word to use if she were to end up as a murder victim—standing 5'6" tall, or 5'8" if she fell asleep without performing the long, tedious ritual of removing the big black boots with the complicated laces. She weighs 174 pounds, which makes her heavier than Horror, but without the Muppet-pig arms. No, the word for Inangela is definitely *pallid*. In another place and time she would've ended up as a goth, and even here, in the civilised age, it's not clear whether the Moby-Dick-white skin is something she's carefully cultivated or whether she was born in monochrome. If this is a first-thing-after-waking, before-any-breakfast description of Inangela then she looks rather uncomfortable as she squints into the mirror, not quite sure whether all her pieces are in place or whether she's just forgotten to switch her "radiant beauty" on.

Let's move forward and see what she looks like when she's fully dressed, which is reasonable, because she's bound to check the mirror again on the way out. The long skirt is mandatory, since no man or beast has ever seen her legs, at least not beyond their natural interior environment of a large, well-padded duvet. The leather coat's mandatory too, even if it's not terribly imaginative. Her face hasn't resolved itself much since she squinted at her early-morning pre-caffeine features, but she's ingeniously applied make-up in such a way that she now looks fully alert, and will spend much of the afternoon constantly re-applying this illusion. Actually, she's become quite pretty in a round-faced sort of way. Her eyes are very, very bright today. Lipstick applied in a tight red kiss-shape counterbalances the fact that she's got a great big mouth.

In fact, "pretty" is not what she's going for. "Majestic" is what she's going for.

The second-to-last thing she does, before she leaves this imaginary mirror, is use her fingers to sweep back her hair. The hair's naturally black, but dyed red at the ends, where an experiment with scarlettine unexpectedly became a fashion statement halfway through. It's very important to make sure that all the red bits are thrown *over* her shoulders in a mock-cavalier way, so it looks like a mane of fire or a halo of living flame, or something.

The *last* thing she does before she leaves is pick up the mask from its hook by the door, and snap it into position in front of her face. There. She turns it into a little eclipse, with the smooth, shiny bone (or faux-bone) slowly covering up her features one by one. She even raises one eyebrow at herself at the last moment, as if she's giving herself the come-on.

Then there's nothing but the face of Faction Paradox looking back at her, and at us. Now she can leave the house, and head off to wherever she's going on this typical imaginary day. There'll probably be one last paranoid tussle of the hair once she's closed the door behind her.

0.04 Couture

Of course, she's not wearing the Faction mask in the stopover. You don't wear masks like that if you're shopping at all-night service stations, however fashionable they may seem: people have an annoying tendency to call the police. Inangela has seen at least one shop with what can only be described as a "No Faction" sign on the door, a crude black-and-white depiction of one of the masks—big eyes, low-set snout, the works—surrounded by a red circle with a thick red line all the way through it.

In her opinion, it's a symbol that's bound to cause confusion. What's it supposed to say? No members of Faction Paradox, even though the organisation's purely mythical? No would-be members of Faction Paradox, and we can tell if you are?

Inangela tends to see it as a sign that the Faction has arrived as a major cultural force, guaranteed to be This Year's Entertaining Threat to the Establishment, and considers it a reflection of the world's overall level of paranoia. The upshot is that she leaves her mask on the dashboard of the van when she goes to buy snackfoods.

0.05 Squaring the Circle

The square, where the War made itself felt in the town for the first time tonight, now smells of meat. For the most part, human senses are primed to react well to the smell of fried meat—it speaks of generations of protein—but here, in the modern world, there's the fear that's been planted in us by years of exposure to news footage from far-away warzones. What you'd call *neo-atavism*, possibly. We smell meat, in a place where the skin of the world's been torn up by missile-fire and people are still dying in the glow of the street-lamps, and we wonder if it might be human. But…

…it's unlikely. It's too sweet, too well-tailored to meet our approval. There's malmiotti and smoked sausage on this battlefield, paprika in the air if you can ignore the undertones of something chemical and incendiary. Around the central point of impact, the food stalls have been blown into woodchips or just collapsed, leaning lopsidedly around the crater with their grill-plates still blowing onion-flavoured smoke out into the night. You almost expect them to shout 'medic!'

Rocket attacks, in the experience of Valentine Bregman, don't leave behind charred corpses. The weaponry involved is too absolute. That which exists at the point of impact, at one of the many Ground Zeros, is very rarely left to smoulder. (Valentine is, incidentally, one of the handful of people who's come to this impact site for what might be called humanitarian reasons. We'll return to him soon enough.)

The scene of the impact, then:

The rocket attack didn't hit the exact centre of the square, but the iron fence on one side, so that from above the crater and the square look like two geometric shapes trying to mate with each other. Normally the food spots would be everywhere, enticing the town's predatory animals to eat of their flesh, and this is the perfect spot for that kind of thing. There's an amusement arcade on one side of the square, a nightclub on another. The attack, of course, has disturbed

this ecosystem. One wall of the bar has been consumed by the crater, and the impact shattered most of the glass on that side of the square, as well as blowing out most of the streetlamps.

This means the casualties, mostly victims of the shockwave, are largely lit by the glow from the arcade—still open, with its machines still running, in spite of the fact that most of those inside have been escorted out of the area. On the paving-stones outside, amidst all the spilled grease and splinters, the bodies of the wounded flash on and off, on and off, on and on and off and on and off and on, in time with the rhythms of the red lights on the slot machines. At least one of them, not quite thinking straight (and understandably so, given the pain, shock and strobe effects) will find herself staring at the Little Devil machine and believing that the next spin of the wheels is going to determine her fate. Psychologists call this "synchronicity," and whole systems of thought have been founded on much, much less.

Everything is flashing here, though not in a rhythm that makes much sense. The South American restaurant on the west side of the square seemed relatively undamaged by the impact itself, but now there's a fire licking at the upper floors of the building, another result of the shockwave as electrical systems jam and gas pipes rupture. The police and paramedics are caught in the crossfire between the firelight and the amusement arcade. There's a smear of red in the sky over the square, which Valentine takes to be a side effect of the attack. It could well be trace elements from whatever materials happen to be used in the weapons of War, reacting badly to oxygen and spreading a layer of chemical scent across the grilled-cheese-and-pepperoni landscape, but who knows?

There are three ambulances at the scene, squeezed into the sidestreets around the square. Three isn't a lot, but it's a busy night, for reasons other than the War. Many of the crewmen are already arguing with the police about the exact placement of the big red STOP: ACCIDENT signs. Even today, two years after the War came to town, nobody's issued the emergency services with specific STOP: WARZONE signs. Valentine, marked out as a creature of mercy by his overalls and not a lot else, skulks his way across the square to see if there's anything more productive he can do.

0.06 Valentine

Valentine doesn't think clothes are particularly relevant, and it shows. Just look. They're as uninterested in him as he is in them. He's got the overalls of an ambulance crewman, but they sit drooping on his shoulders in a decidedly uninterested way, and he wears them

unbuttoned so that the two lapels flap around him like a doctor's uniform (you might argue that either he or the overalls have delusions of grandeur, if they didn't look equally sulky).

Underneath, and you have to understand that this isn't strictly regulation, he wears a grey t-shirt and a pair of faded jeans. Both of which are currently sticking to his pale little body on this hot night. The ensemble says more about him than he might like to think. It says that as far as he's concerned, he'll be fine as long as people can see why he's hanging around the wounded and the War-struck. Tell him that he should smarten himself up and he'll probably say 'er, okay,' but once he's alone he'll wonder why he bothers listening to hospital management.

In fact, there's only one item he wears which is deliberately geared to make a statement. There's a set of military dog-tags around his neck, in silver and on a silver chain. It's his own personal protest against the War, a War in which dog-tags play absolutely no part, since everyone's a potential casualty and no bodies seem to survive anyway. The tags are, naturally, blank. Very few people notice this subtle political point, and really it's just a second-rate replacement for the far more overt anti-War stick-pin he used to wear, until management made him take it off.

These are Valentine's clothes. Underneath he's not sure there's that much to see. He's young, spindly and all too aware of the awkwardness he carries around with him, not in the sense that he's actually likely to knock things over but in the sense that he's never been a definite *type*. He's tall, but not tall enough to be tall and gangly, and thin, but not svelte enough to look like a glam-rock star. He suspects that this discomfort is due to the fact that after a lifetime's exposure to advertising (from the second he was born, as it happens, but this is another story) he's never seen a single human being on a commercial who looks like him. He'd like to think that this makes him demographically unique, although he knows that in fact it just makes him feel like he's made of acute angles. His hair is short, spiky and heads off in an impressive number of directions at once, even if the exact nature of those directions changes according to the amount of gel he tries to apply. His face is prone to stubble, which makes him look perpetually worn out, but this is fine because he drives an ambulance on the night shift so that's how he's expected to be.

He's twenty-two years old, and he's been told he has a face that makes him look as though he's going to say 'sorry, what?' to any given question.

Occasionally he gets angry. He gets angry when he sees the after-shock of the War, and he gets even angrier when nobody else seems to

notice the after-shock of the War. Most people he knows wouldn't be able to imagine him angry, though, because he tends to keep this sort of thing to himself. He's a junior crewman, a position he sees not only as a way of fighting back against the War and all things related but also as a kind of sabotage.

For him, saving people's lives is a two-finger salute to the War-time powers at least as much as it is an act of compassion.

0.07 UST

The final musical number is set on a farm. Oh, of course: It's got to be the Muppet version of *Animal Farm*. The man who must surely be Orwell stands among the pigs, dogs and mystery animals, doing his best to keep up with the real stars of the show. Who's he supposed to be, though…? Ah. He's the farmer. Fair enough. Ironic, though, given the farmer's meant to represent the weak, helpless old order. And look at Orwell's face as he's acted off the screen by a bear in a necktie.

A bear? In *Animal Farm*? Pff.

Halfway through the musical number—a rendition of "Power to the People," which seems fitting—Miss Piggy gets into a fight with the horse (nobody can ever remember the name of the Muppet horse) about who's the star. Their argument can be heard above the harmonious wailing of the other Muppets, and thankfully the dispute doesn't end the way it does in the book, but with Miss Piggy throwing a tantrum.

'Hmph!' she says, as she tosses her head back and storms off to her dressing-room. 'Well, obviously, *some* animals are more equal than others.'

Or that was what it sounded like. But here's the problem: Inangela is lacking some psychological coherency right now, for a variety of reasons, the almost-getting-hit-by-rockets thing among them. Everything is out of focus, somehow. The sense that one of the rockets hit the pipeline that connects her to the culture-in-general, and that as a result she's not reading the same text as everyone else. Or the same subtext.

It could be the War. Or it could just be the ritual.

'Can you see this?' she asks, finally turning to face Horror.

'Yeah,' says Horror. 'What about it?'

'Is that really George Orwell? Am I really seeing this?'

Horror shrugs.

'I don't know about anything more than six months old,' she says.

Inangela squints at her. ‘Why *do* I hang around with you, anyway?’ she asks.

‘Unresolved sexual tension,’ says Horror.

It’s probably just a phrase she’s heard somewhere.

0.08 Horror

Horror is a curious creature, and the most obviously curious thing about her is her name. Any real name she might have is unlikely to be revealed, and her reasons for choosing this one (if, indeed, it wasn’t forced on her) are as difficult to analyse as the contents of her bloodstream. None of the things it immediately suggests seem to apply to her. Black really isn’t her colour, for one thing. And as awkward and contrary as she is, it’s doubtful she would have been the kind of child whom parents affectionately see as a small, cute sort of horror. Not bad-looking, in her way, but… ungainly.

In fact, unlike Inangela she doesn’t appear to have any interest in making an impression at all. Tonight she’s dressed in her usual plain sleeveless t-shirt, plus baggy combat pants, worn more because they’re easy to put on than as a statement in military chic. The big, clunky black boots seem a half-hearted attempt to get taller (Horror’s never been known to use the whole of her heart, which is far too busy keeping her slow, plump blood moving around her slow, plump body). She has a faded tattoo on the flesh of her upper right arm, an animal that’s only ever been identified with a shrug. Her hair’s cropped short and dyed red, but it’s easy to imagine her being born that way. She also has a number of visible piercings, one stud in the side of her nose, two in her tongue, one at her eyebrow and three in her ear, but again, there’s that sense of ‘why not?’ about all of this.

Horror, as Inangela well knows, is an expert at wandering through life. She has no sense of ritual and doesn’t need a mission. She’s happy to go along with most of what Inangela suggests, drifts off on her own when she gets bored and says ‘hhuh’ if she’s not interested in the first place. Inangela has no idea where Horror got all the studs, but she imagines a whole series of men wandering up to her in nightclubs and saying ‘excuse me, can I stick this in your face?’, and Horror replying ‘yeah, if you want.’ Or ‘yeah, if you want, I need a drink.’ Though she occasionally refers to “boyfriends,” Inangela’s convinced that these man-anecdotes are just things which came pre-formatted when Horror arrived in the world, since Inangela’s never known her to show any bona fide signs of sexuality at all. That would require too much energy.

Horror's magnetic, that's the truth of it. Wherever she goes, whatever environment she passes through, something will always stick. Put her into a warzone and she'd slouch out of it unscathed, but wearing a bullet through each nipple. She'd sleep through a nuclear strike and wake up stoned from the radiation, shuffling off to the fridge with the post-fallout munchies. She goes beyond Nietzche's philosophy of "whatever does not kill me, makes me stronger" and into a confusing new world of "whatever does not kill me, I'll be shooting up by the end of the week."

While Inangela's perpetually finding new projects to not-quite-finish and new ways to re-define the world, Horror never seems fully awake. Even when she's driving. Especially not when she's driving. There should be a sign in the back of the van that reads, "Caution, driver is generally not bothered."

0.09 The Other Side of Town

The last of the fireworks scatters itself over the heads of the crowd, shedding little red glowing particles from one side of the arena to the other. It's a cruel, cruel trick to play on an audience in a town like this, a town that's so often intersected (that's the only word for it) by the War. The first of the rockets went up just after midnight, just as the performing artiste Ms. Tiffany Korta made her retreat from the stage at the end of the second encore, so the last thing she must have seen were the looks of shock on the faces of her semi-adoring and semi-ironic public.

Those of them who *had* visible faces, anyway. There are more masks every day.

Callous insensitivity by the Executive which arranged this performance? Possibly, or possibly a deliberate flirting with danger. Most of the fireworks were, significantly, exactly the same tone of red as the average rocket attack. There's nothing remotely dangerous about Tiffany Korta, this girl with her big eyes and her animal-blonde hair and her notoriously violent hip movements. Not on paper. She's never expressed a political opinion that might offend more than 3% of the target demographic, has never been able to make a statement about the state of the modern world without beginning 'well, y'know.' And yet…

…she flirts. Or her image does. The occasional striking piece of *grotesquerie* in a video. The occasional strangely-chosen fashion statement during a two-song public appearance. T-shirt designs which might, if read through the correct filter of pop symbology, suggest something more. Enough to convince those who supposedly hate

“pure” pop music that somehow, she isn’t as bad as the rest. Even the decision to stage a performance here, in the open air, is slightly off-key. A brilliant stroke on behalf of her Executive, unless, of course, there really *is* something strange going on.

No. Couldn’t be. This crowd’s old enough to know better, surely?

So the pop diva vanishes while the sky lights up in the colours of shellfire, and everyone in the crowd jumps, then laughs, then goes home on edge anyway.

Mostly, this place is just a field. For three nights every two years, there’s a “world music” festival here, the only thing for which this town is known to the outside world. Occasionally there are special one-off performances, but festival or one-off, the same thing happens. Great barriers go up around the field, forming a solid wall, like those huge wooden defences around Skull Island in *King Kong*. Since the barriers are woefully inadequate at keeping gatecrashers out, and obviously wouldn’t be much good at keeping in a runaway celebrity, it’s likely that the people who first designed this layout had something similar in mind. Future generations will no doubt wish to clone giant versions of the pop stars who inhabit this territory, and get them to fight out their artistic differences within the perimeter. But for now, all the barrier can do is set out a kind of space. A town inside the town proper, which only exists for one night in five-hundred. All right, then. More like Brigadoon than Skull Island.

Inside the perimeter? The concessions. You’d expect burger stalls and hot-dog vendors, and here they are. But this town-in-miniature specialises in the exotic. They do things with meat here that nobody would dare to try in the outside world. The burgers are fried not just with membrane-thin fragments of onion, that disappear and become part of the atmosphere as soon as they hit the oil, but with red, peppercorn-tinted ingredients that have no parallel in the real world. These are the things your parents warned you not to eat. They can’t be replicated beyond the walls of the arena.

In fact, though neither the vendors nor the eaters realise it, these unheard-of spices and strange-loops of deep-fried sausage aren’t just ingredients. The tastes and smells on offer here intersect this part of the world in the same way the War does. The heat of this particular night, the exact combination of fashions and factions in the crowd, the sweat on Tiffany Korta’s body as she performed the inevitable ceremony of returning for two encores: though nobody can read it, these are part of a system of thought, just like any town or town-in-miniature. The food only exists here and now. It’s the key to unlocking this particular little pop-culture space-time event. Taste is powerful that way.

0.10 Tiffany

Tiffany Korta, as she appeared on stage ten minutes ago:

1. Hair. Dyed blonde, dirt-blonde, in such a way that all the world can see it's dyed. This should not, and does not, give the impression that this Little Cuban girl is trying to hide her roots either literally or figuratively. The hair is shoulder-length, with permanent waves, making it mane-like and wilfully ragged. It's precisely, deliberately engineered to look as if it's been left to run wild. The body-language of certain dance routines is calculated to accentuate this, to make her movements seem feral, to turn her nails into weapons as well as fashion statements.

She's Demeter, the wilderness, everything that's primal and ultimately irresistible. She's Shiasta and Jane of the Jungle. She's capable of sudden, predatory acts.

2. Top. In black leather, treated to give the air of something bordering on the fetishistic. It has no arms, and is laced together at the front: the majority of hetero males who saw this performance will go home remembering that she wore a corset, but photographs of the event will insist that she'd never be so cheap. Breasts are marginally visible between the laces, and bra-straps are visible under the fabric on her shoulders, giving the impression that she's naked under the top but leaving the after-image of black lingerie. The navel remains visible as a matter of course.

She's Sophia, the prostitute-queen. She's all-knowing and skilled in all the arts of the skin. She's the Woman in Red and Mary Culver. She's professionally desirable.

3. Leather pants. It doesn't matter what country you're from, they're pants, not trousers. Skin-tight at the top but widening out as they reach her ankles, flared with patches of triangular fabric sewn into the cut seams. Non-blatant retro. It says history, that she's part of a tradition. The female part of the audience finds this reassuring. The pants prove, on some level, that this girl is not a slut. Covered legs but not entirely non-sexual, the low-level reminder that her ancestors had to fight to wear clothes like these back in the days when the flares were the height of fashion.

She's the goddess of the hunt. Her heritage is a heritage of quiet control. She's Black Ayesha and Zaranna the Warrior-Maiden. She's playfully dangerous.

4. Jewellery. A pin in the navel is obligatory. Diamond. A single glaring point of exotica. In addition, a second diamond-like stud in the forehead, also suggesting the exotic. It has overtones of an eastern

princess, not only establishing multi-culturalism but also a hint of royalty. The meaning of the third-eye-star is open to question, but not deeply-rooted enough in the psyches of the audience for any unpleasant or sinister connotations to make themselves felt. The implication of *preparation* here goes largely unnoticed (very few people still remember *Around the World in Eighty Days* and the legend of widow-princesses being thrown onto the funeral pyre of the husband) Two points of light on her body, one on the head and one of the stomach.

She's a sacrifice.

0.11 Those Closest

The girl on the pavement outside the amusement arcade is wearing a mask. The mask, like almost all of its kind, looks like bone but can't possibly be. The masks from the higher-class boutiques and fetish emporiums are crafted to have that look of a genuine, crack-edged, hollowed-out animal skull, although this particular model is cheaper and polished to a white ceramic shine.

This is the fashion, and has been ever since the words "Faction Paradox" became common currency. The rest of the girl's clothes suggest someone less fashion-conscious. She has jeans, and a t-shirt bearing an advertisement for a major clothing brand as well as the flag of the country where that brand originated, with a denim jacket lying on the pavement nearby (it's fair to assume she was carrying it). The mask looks faintly absurd without the jacket. The t-shirt and jeans are too slight, too much like items that she just threw on, so it's as though the bone-mask has been stuck onto her face as an afterthought. Blonde hair framing it on all sides and sticking to the panic-sweat on her neck.

This girl, who remains nameless, has no obvious injuries. She's lying very still, though, breathing awkwardly and with her head twisted to one side, the big black eyes of the mask turned towards the cracked-but-intact glass front of the arcade. The patterns of nearby debris tell the story. When the War intersected with the square, the shockwave ripped up several fragments of paving-slab close to the impact point, and although none of the larger pieces got as far as the arcade it's obvious that the girl was standing closer to the epicentre at the time. One of the fragments was fired directly into her torso, throwing her across the pavement (if the shockwave wasn't already doing most of the work) and almost certainly cracking her ribcage. The lack of movement and interrupted breathing suggests there's additional internal damage.

These casualties of the War, people caught on the edge of the blast rather than being burned up at its core, are common. Oddly enough they seem to attract slightly more press coverage than the rocket attacks proper, perhaps because they're so much easier to photograph. Even so, only the police and Valentine's breed tend to get this close. It's one of the things which gives the War its air of abstraction.

0.12 Lightning Response

In fact, Valentine exaggerates a little when he thinks of himself as being "closer" to the War than most. In truth this is only the third time he's been called to a War site, and it's the first time he and Coz have arrived quite this early, before almost all of the other crews. Though call-outs are theoretically distributed between crews at random, every two-man team in the town will invariable feel that they're deliberately given a certain kind of case, in addition to the standard heart attack victims which *everybody* gets. Valentine obviously hasn't been marked out for War-duty by the management.

An hour ago Valentine and Coz were at the Tiffany Korta "performance"—the sarcastic quotation marks are his own—having parked the ambulance in the field outside the arena, a standard precaution whenever large numbers of hormonally-charged people are gathered together in an environment likely to cause fainting, dehydration and mild food poisoning. In the heat of the night, he and Coz spent most of the performance outside the ambulance, leaning against the side of the vehicle and watching the light from Ms. Korta's huge video-screen making rapid-cut flashes in the sky over the arena. When the *big* flash came—as a sudden burst of red that must of burned itself into the blood-cells of eyes for miles around—it took them a while to realise that it wasn't part of the light show. The thunder-rumble of the impact was almost completely drowned out by the muffled bassline of a txt-friendly song about living 4U. It's doubtful that anyone inside the arena even noticed.

'Fuck,' said Coz, once he'd finished blinking from the lightning-flash and he'd worked out what was going on.

'That, uhh… that was a rocket, wasn't it?' Valentine said. Even now he's amazed that he could respond to any crisis by sounding quite so stupid. The War just isn't what they usually do.

Ironic, given Valentine's particular interest in it. But there you go.

In the end, they didn't start up the ambulance until Valentine prompted Coz with the seemingly-unnecessary words 'we should go.' Coz popped a couple of his pills before they set off, and on the way

Valentine realised that given what he had to do later on tonight, the rocket attack was pretty much an omen. Call it more synchronicity if you like, but his skin's been itching ever since.

0.13 Service

When Tiffany Korta gets back to her hotel room, there's nobody around but the attendant who opens the door for her: "bell-boy" is hardly the right term, since he lacks the comedy jaunty red hat that comes with the role and he looks as if he's only working here while he's on break from art school, so he insists on making his plain white shirt look all puffy and romantic/ New Romantic. He looks anxious as Tiffany checks out her quarters, still in her leather pants and with fake tan running off her body like sweat. Though she doesn't pick up on it straight away, the reason he's nervous is because he's not sure what the protocol is here and whether he should hope for a tip. He knows how rich she must be—even though "money" is as abstract a quality to her as "distance"—but he can't shake the feeling that, like royalty, she never carries cash. He's really quite perceptive.

There are no members of the Executive in the room. This is a good thing, Tiffany decides. At the end of the bed is a selection of televisions, each and every one wired up to a VCR—some on the cabinet, some on the floor, one or two arranged on chairs. Screens and machines of all ages, scavenged from rooms around the hotel, one of them covered in grease and probably taken from the kitchens. Some of them hooked up to the hotel's cable system, some of them sporting black, vicious-looking indoor aerials, all making up a web of electrical wiring which Tiffany somehow finds both reassuring and familiar. There are fourteen of them in all. All switched on, and mercifully they're all tuned (*programmed*… this isn't the 1960s) to the same channel, so when they speak you feel as if you don't have quite enough ears, like it's part of some colossal alien concept of "stereo" for which humans aren't equipped.

'Um, where are the others?' asks Tiffany, with the usual twang in her voice. She doesn't take her eyes off the screens as she says it.

The boy pauses before he says 'errrr….' The 'errr' isn't leading to anything. He's hoping she'll interrupt him, ideally by shouting at him and making excessive demands. No doubt he'd be able to deal with that, since he's seen pop stars on television.

'…how many did you want?' he asks, once he realises she isn't playing along.

'Another… eight?' Tiffany suggests. She's not taking her eyes off the

screens, but in all honesty she couldn't tell you what they're showing if you asked her. It's all just form and colour, something red and explosive but never mind the details. She's just making sure, making *absolutely sure*, that all the pictures really are identical.

'It's, er, difficult,' says the boy. 'We've taken all the sets from the empty rooms, but… if you want more then we'll have to ask the other guests, and… they might not, err…'

She turns to look at him. She's not quite sure whether he's saying that he can't do it, or that he doesn't think it's a good idea. She wonders whether he wants something, and she briefly—only very very briefly—considers offering him sex. She almost immediately concludes this isn't part of the protocol.

'Well, I need at another eight,' she says, more definitely this time. 'At least.'

0.14 Pictures of Birds and Bees

Tiffany's reasons for not having sex with the boy have nothing to do with morality, in the accepted sense of the word, and it goes without saying that it's not about attraction either. It's about reproduction, in a specifically non-animal way. Lesser animals will have sex to re-create their DNA and spread it further afield, coupling with the strongest available mates to give their own flesh and blood the greatest possible chance. But humans, at least humans like Tiffany, are more complex.

This is how the protocol works, at least as far as she's been able to understand it from the Executive:

Tiffany is in a (theoretical) bar. It's a fashionable bar. There'll always be reporters in this bar, or people who know reporters, or at the very least other members of the celebrity bloodline that we'll call *homo imago*. She makes contact with one of these others, male or female, it makes a difference but both are feasible. Whatever display the two of them put on, it gets the attention of the rest of the bar. They might act as if they're planning to have sex. They might actually have sex, either in the toilets or elsewhere. This mating process, as a concept if not as a physical act, is captured by the observers and reported.

Within twenty-four hours, the images of both Tiffany and her mate will expand and proliferate throughout the world, taking precedence over the images of the rest of the *homo imago* bloodline in just about every conceivable medium. Tiffany has done what any animal has to do—she's grown. She's acquired new mass, in the culture-in-general if

not in flesh and blood, although she's found that there's an increasingly narrow divide between the two. Everything about her, or everything important about her—her face, her skin, her identity, all the things she represents—have been passed on, mixed with the cultural DNA of her mate.

Alternatively: she has sex with a nameless boy in a hotel room. Nobody sees it. Nobody's around to carry the image away with them. The boy tells his friends, and some of them believe him, and several months later there are vague rumours in the press that Tiffany Korta likes to score a bit of rough when nobody's watching. It's a weak choice of mate. The next generation of herself is born lame and retarded.

Occasionally there'll be a surprise in the reproductive process, and a peculiarly strong "novelty" birth will emerge from one of these couplings, but the Executive has taught Tiffany that the results are far too unpredictable to take the risk. So no sex tonight, then.

0.15 Closer

Less than an hour ago, Inangela was sitting in an alleyway just off the square where the first of the night's rocket attacks eventually arrived (because rocket attacks aren't *launched* any more, they just *arrive*, when they're damn good and ready). Inangela left the area at 11:32—ambling past the unlicensed food counters, treating the sound of frying onions as if it were a round of applause from a an audience of very small, very edible people. She met up with Horror, at the House of Marrero, just before 11:40.

This was when the missile strike hit the square. It is, as it happens, an experience to which human beings can adjust with very little difficulty. It's like lightning, really. The sense you get when the rockets hit the ground within two-hundred yards is the same as the sense you get when lightning strikes the tower-block next door, when the noise and the light really *do* happen at exactly the same moment, just like you see in the movies. You're used to hearing rocket-fire, but not that close. You're used to seeing the red powder-burns in the sky —mostly from television, it's got to be said—but only as something distant, something abstract. Then suddenly it's hanging over you, up-lighting the whole of the night, flashing on and off like an electrical storm.

Horror's reaction was to swear, however laconically. Inangela's was even more predictable:

'I could have *been* in that.'

But there's disappointment there. Longing, even. That's just it, you see. This War is everywhere, but it's an abstract thing, a friend-of-a-friend War. Seeing the red glare bearing down on you, carried by the big pregnant rainclouds, is like seeing a celebrity while you're walking down the street. Everyone has stories about being there, about feeling the prickle of hot dust being sprinkled on their faces (although whether it's imaginary or a kind of fall-out, nobody can say without knowing more about the weapons). Everyone close to tonight's Ground Zero must have felt the urge to ask the impact for its autograph, or tell it that it looks smaller on television.

'I could have *been* in that.' By which she really meant: Jesus, I could've been a lot closer to that, if I'd known it was coming. I could have stood on the very edge of the blast-zone with my arms spread wide, letting the red light blast across this mask in such a striking way.

I could have felt that the War was real, just for this one night.

Later on, she might tell people that she was closer than she actually was, the same as anyone else would. She'll *definitely* treat it like an omen. Assuming, that is, that nothing more interesting happens tonight.

0.16 Higher Forms of Life

The history of warfare is a history of increasing remoteness. A history of abstraction, even. This much is certain. Early-era warfare involves the cut-and-thrust of the melee, the constant jeopardy of the frontline. Later, the invention of the firearm moves the soldiers further and further apart, until the machine-weapon finally makes full engagement impossible; while the creation of really slick, highly fetishistic technology allows the exercise to be controlled from an different land-mass, the myth being that attacks can be guided with precision and that hardly anybody on the attacking side has to die that way.

But those fighting this current War have a higher technology still.

Well, of course they do. These great warriors, who fight this War but are never seen. They're the exotic, the distant and the powerful, the ones to whom mere townsfolk can never aspire. In this town the people joke about their own inherent uselessness, about the fact that everything they do seems somehow drab and parochial, that nobody from around here could ever be as slick or as glamorous or as fundamentally *important* as the people who make those shiny, dynamic, devastating rockets.

Not that anybody's ever seen one of the rockets. This is what you really have to understand, if you're to understand towns like this at all. You might wonder how these people can live with the War when they don't understand its nature, when they're not even wholly sure who's fighting it or what the objectives are. But the motives of their allies/ protectors/ partners-in-crime are irrelevant. The name of the enemy is unimportant. Because they understand, deep down, that this is simply the next stage of abstraction: a War so remote that even the shape of battle remains obscure. The constant attacks and sporadic casualties may not be subtle, but you can be sure that the invisible, unknowable strategies behind them are subtle indeed. The locals no doubt feel that they're not qualified to understand such things.

Perhaps the main problem is that nobody knows for certain what the War-time powers can do. Obviously, everyone agrees they're technologically superior to anybody you might actually meet on the streets—not that they're a wholly different kind of person, as such, but they must know things and think things and plan things beyond the usual state of comprehension. The fact that they can destroy virtually anything isn't open to question. Weather control has been suggested, but erratic weather was a feature of the local topography long before the War came to town. Right at the top of the "spurious claims" chart there's the suggestion of time-active warfare, the belief that the War is in some way being fought according to unfamiliar and non-linear timetables, but it's an established fact that time-technology is impossible and only the myth of Faction Paradox suggests otherwise.

Which leads to the big question, of course. These supermen, these great empire-builders, these wonderful people capable of fighting battles which intersect with the town in such a casual fashion… if they can destroy individual buildings from a distance of a billion, trillion miles, or cause an individual to be struck down by lightning without ever leaving their homes, then why does the War exist at all? Why these "rockets," these things which tear open the pavements and leave such huge, gaping wounds in the sides of the pizzerias?

Again, the only answer is that the War requires it. It's often said that the War is in some way about *history*, about the way it shapes the future, about the design it leaves imprinted on the face of the world. Why bomb the squares? Why send the missiles through the streets, burning away any pedestrian or vehicle that might get in the way?

Because otherwise, how would anybody know there *was* a War, at all?

0.17 Complete Synch

Coz—Coz being short for "Connell," Connell being Valentine's long-term partner on the nightshift—is on the other side of the square, not far from the wounded nightclub, caught in the on-off-on-off light of the red neon sign. Valentine instinctively glances in Coz's direction as he hurries to the injured girl's side.

Coz looks tired, which might not be surprising for someone in his line of work, but it's significantly out of character. Coz is better-known among his colleagues for his bursts of frantic, uncontrollable hyperactivity—a cause for concern, especially when it involves him threatening bystanders who get in his way, or (as on one occasion) throwing a steel litter-bin through the window of a car after an argument with its driver. Right now, though, he looks a lot like an alcoholic who's just realised that he hasn't been able to walk straight for the last ten years. His balding, ape-like head is bowed low as he stands in the red flicker-light, one hand massaging his eyeballs in their sockets, swaying on his legs like the big bronze man in *Jason and the Argonauts* (any further description is unnecessary). The *apparent* reason for his weariness is that nearby, on the edge of the crater, two policemen are physically restraining an obvious drunk. The obvious drunk has another obvious drunk as a friend and confidante, but obvious drunk #2 is sitting on the ground with one leg torn open, sometimes swearing at the policemen and sometimes asking them for help. Coz is apparently waiting for the situation to resolve itself before he checks the fallen man's injury.

That's the *apparent* reason. Valentine knows better.

But closer to hand is the girl in the mask, and she's still not moving. Strictly speaking, Valentine should be reassuring her at this point, telling her not to worry *just in case* it turns out she's conscious. He can't really bring himself to do it. He starts to scrape the sweat-matted hair away from the sides of her head, revealing the strap that keeps the mask on. It's probably not the mask that's stopping her breathing properly, but you never know.

At this point she stops breathing. Valentine panics, understandably.

Obviously he's done the training, but the unofficial protocol of the profession demands that the more experience and more middle-aged member of any two-man crew should be the one to perform vital last-minute life-saving work. Which is why, training or no training, Valentine's first reaction is to shout: '*Coz!*'

Across the square, Coz doesn't appear to hear him. He's too busy telling a policeman, in a rather disinterested and lacklustre way, not to move the injured obvious drunk.

'*Coz!*' Valentine shouts, again, but he's already moving in to perform

emergency procedures on the girl himself.

At this point, and without warning, she starts breathing all on her own. At exactly the same moment, behind the glass front of the amusement arcade, the Little Devil machine lights up with a little red sign that says GET LUCKY!

0.18 Decorum

A girl was killed here in town, a few days ago. Not killed as a consequence of War (which isn't unusual), or killed in a traffic accident on one of the many, many ring-roads and throughways (which isn't unusual either). No: the girl was murdered, and the murder was brutal, and the locals were shocked, and even newspapers outside the town took notice, if only for a little while.

The killer hasn't been identified, nor does it seem likely he ever will be. "He" is more or less a certainty, since even though the killing lacked an overt, sexual meaning it still had that sense of *violation* that smacks of male lust, dirty bedsits and obsessive behaviour. The murder is not, in itself, significant. There was no sense of sacrifice, no ritual pattern, and it's highly improbable the killer will strike again (say) tonight. The girl was fourteen years old and, as far as anyone can ascertain, had no secrets deeper than those you'd expect. Cigarettes, mild doses of alcohol, at least one night spent kissing more than one fifteen-year-old boy, etcetera. She had no special interests, liked two of Tiffany Korta's eight singles but generally preferred Waco Black, and was ambivalent on the topic of Faction Paradox masks.

And yet the girl outside the amusement arcade, with her stylised pseudo-Faction mask and her obvious need to stand out against the night, reminds Valentine of the murdered girl. Or of the news story of the murdered girl, which is as intimate as it gets. A skull with no jaw and no teeth, too self-confident even to laugh. There's no direct correlation between a butchered child and a teen club-goer with an interest in neo-goth chic, but in light of recent events there's something *disrespectful* about all of this. Even Valentine gets a twinge of it, and he knows he should know a damn sight better.

He also knows that the brother-and-sisterhood between the people who wear the masks is a fragile one, held together by fashion and prone to collapse if they're spat at in the street.

No real revolutionary would ever go masked. That's the lesson.

0.19 Even So...

…notice one thing here. Valentine was about to remove the girl's mask, just out of procedure, when she suddenly stopped breathing. During the period of panic that follows he makes no attempt to finish what he started, to hurriedly tear the mask away from the girl's face. He's already started to think that it belongs there. Perhaps because the echo of her breathing, scraping against the inside of the bone-faced polymer, is so much easier for him to hear if he leaves the mask on. Or perhaps because he's spent so much time in the back of the ambulance, fitting oxygen masks to the sick and the gasping, it seems only natural for the girl to have *something* over her mouth. It's as if she's brought her own life-support equipment.

0.20 Traces of Nuts

Inangela is standing in front of the chocolate rack at the stopover. Or possibly not, since her time-perception is verging on the mysterious and she's got the feeling that it's taking much longer than usual for the outside world to make an impression on her. But let's say, for the sake of argument, that she's standing in front of the chocolate counter right *now*.

Alchemists, cabalists, witches, wannabes, fakirs, fakers and pedants of all descriptions. There's nothing they like more than catalogues of daemons. Is that why they *really* spent all that time in all those darkened rooms? Is that why they filled their basements with fumes guaranteed to rot the nervous connections of the brain, or stuffed themselves with specially-coded poisons, or locked themselves away until the loneliness and self-flagellation made them hallucinate? Is that why they pushed themselves on, and on, and on, hoping to come across *one more* species of daemon, *one more* variety of guardian angel? Not because they believed the next apparition could have all the answers, but just because… they wanted to collect the set?

Now, Inangela's a completist, even though she regularly changes her mind about what she needs to be complete. She's tried sugar, caffeine, high-fat diets and booze in absurd quantities. She's tried drinks that ostensibly make you go blind (but don't), drinks that require you to suck a special kind of worm in advance and drinks that apparently only work if you perform a precise ritual of setting them on fire and then performing a special dance. She's tried treating every different pizza topping as another kind of sacrament. She was hoping that each one of these would provide her with contact with one of the greater powers of existence, so that she could name it and check it off. And none of these things can be considered absolute failures, even if she's never seen the daemons so far.

Every substance you take into your body is a ritual substance. Chocolate? It deals in seratonin, adjusts the balance of your biology, does things to a woman that only nature's supposed to understand. Just think of those alchemists, with all their elemental poisons and all the codes they kept for all their best ingredients. Idiots. You could get the same results with the twenty-two iterations of chocolate available right here on the racks of the stopover. Each one dressed in its own colours, covered by its own symbology, marked with its own warnings and credos (MAY CONTAIN TRACES OF NUTS… SUITABLE FOR VEGETARIANS). To say nothing of the icons. The little corporate symbols. Stylised rune-letters and animal-faced people. Every cartoon character the avatar of something larger, because all snacks bring forth daemons, even if they're just the kind you get from glucose and hyperactivity.

There are those who say that ritual requires ancient knowledge. Inangela couldn't care less about ancient knowledge. She knows what ritual really is, on a purely instinctive level, and that's why she's already made precise plans for this evening. Plans which start right here, in a stopover on the very most northern edge of town, the furthest you can go before civilisation gives way to the darkness beyond where there's no electric lighting and no services for another twenty miles along the road.

0.21 On Chocolate

Ah yes. Chocolate was established as *the* definitive substance of witchcraft in the 1700s, when cocoa was spreading across the western world like the next big thing and the line between the rational and the ritualistic was even shakier than it is at this exact moment in time. This annoys Inangela, who feels she has an *instinctive* understanding of the ritual use of chocolate and objects to the idea that she's got anything in common with a bunch of witches, let alone a bunch of antique witches who were probably prostitutes anyway.

Inangela is not a witch. Nor does she believe in anything remotely spiritual, because that would be stupid and clumsy and embarrassing. What she *is*, however—which is to say, what she calls herself—is a ritualist. Admittedly this leads to her doing things which even the Wicca contingent would find upsetting, but there's a major difference which will no doubt make itself clear in time.

Now, there's one other thing that Inangela grudgingly admires about the alchemists and elementalists of the past. She respects their pedantry. This might seem odd, especially since she herself is quite evidently ready to change her mind about any important point within

the space of minutes, but there's a logic here. She loves catalogues. She loves boxes in shoe-shops that are lined up according to bright primary colours. When she was a child, mail-order catalogues were where toys came from, each big-eyed piece of collectable plastic having its own number and its own secret code. When she ran smack into puberty, catalogues were where clothing came from, and much the same thing applied except with overtones of sex, glamour and adulthood; and now the protocols of Faction Paradox have very nearly become a fashion statement in themselves. Faction Paradox, that legendary underground fashion-conspiracy.

Faction Paradox, with its complex chains of rituals, procedures, histories, counter-histories, ranks, orders, bestiaries, icons, codices, catalysts and nonce-words. Faction Paradox, which, most of all, sees all these processes as being almost infinitely mutable. Or so it's said.

That's it. That's the key to understanding Inangela. She could spend hours making lists and inventories—of things she owns, things she wears, or things she's just invented—and then rip the lists up in a moment of pique. She hates having to remember things, and the alchemists had the right idea. Whole volumes full of mystical ingredients, full of symbols and ciphers as meaningless and as glorious as mail-order product numbers, and no two ever agree on the exact relationship between Black Crow and Red Mercury or Grey Dog and White Lightning. Mysticism re-invents itself, day by day and hour by hour. The lists are never the same twice.

Once Inangela has a ritual to perform, be it in the name of a greater truth or the correct application of make-up, she'll stick with it. Some people, those who tend to side with one lifelong religion or party, would say this is because she's secretly very unhappy and needs meaning in her life. Like fuck. She *has* meaning. If anything she's got too much meaning, and she'll invent more of it at a moment's notice, reading every shift in chic as an omen or treating every event in her life as a crucible of the truth. She insists on making her mark on the world, in spray-paint or nail varnish, and she knows what that mark has to be with a near-visionary certainty. She's nineteen years old. She has a right to this.

That's why she's designed the ritual, the initiation, which has now brought herself and Horror to the northern edge of town. But the preparation for this particular ritual was a long and hazardous process, and it'll stretch her faculties to the full. Already she's finding it unusually hard to concentrate. "Unusually" given that tonight she hasn't consumed anything more than 3.5% by volume.

0.22 Wonderful People Out There in the Dark

A lot of the people in the crowd were wearing Faction Paradox masks, of one kind or another. In retrospect Tiffany remembers *most* of them wearing masks, but she knows it can't possibly be true. The bone-faces, with their snouts and their big wide eyes, are just a lot more noticeable than the usual human eyes-nose-mouth arrangement. Porcelain heads, lit up by the dull red glow of the fireworks. Some of the masks were smooth enough, slick enough, to be mass-produced, but some of them looked a lot like papier-mache. The idea being that as Faction Paradox is supposedly an *underground* movement, you don't have to buy officially-licensed merchandise to be part of it and your own home-made attempt at a Faction fetish is good enough.

Tiffany isn't sure how she feels about that. It doesn't seem proper, somehow. Her Catholic upbringing tells her it lacks that sense of "official blessing."

It's difficult to say what styles the other members of the crowd were wearing, the ones whose dark, forgettable faces hovered around the bone-masks in the pretend-rocket-light. It's difficult even to make guesses. Tiffany's Executive has made sure she isn't tied to any one particular fashion/ demographic group, so although it tries to give a general *impression* of her that she's the top-forty-pop-star that it's okay to like if you're a rocker or a retro-kid, she can't be seen in any of the relevant uniforms. This is, as the Executive knows, in the nature of the times. Faction Paradox is spreading as an aesthetic, as a movement, because no one form of culture is attached to it. Tiffany—who wouldn't be seen dead in any kind of mask, although in one video she did wear white geisha make-up which *might* have been interpreted as following the bat-skull pattern—is an all-purpose icon. It's her duty to be all things to all people.

Once the video recorders and TV screens she's requested arrive in her hotel room, she'll replay the nights events and cast one eye over the fashion sense of the crowd, in the hope of divining something significant from it. But it won't take long for the other eye to get distracted, because as it happens, the tapes of her performance contain something which will interest and alarm her a great deal more.

0.23 Note:

It doesn't take much to alarm Tiffany, for a number of reasons. One: her "lifestyle" is such that her Executive shifts her from place to place,

city to city, nation to nation, event to event on a pretty much daily basis, spiriting her away—apt word, that—according to its own plans and calculations. The astrology of demographics and public opinion. This means she exists in a permanent sense of dislocation, a perfectly reasonable way for a human being to live but not something that gels well with most people's view of "civilisation." In short, she panics if she sits still for too long.

Two: cocaine. This isn't remotely shocking. You can take it as read, unless there's hard evidence to the contrary, that *any* face regularly seen on television will have had cocaine fed into it at some point recently. In fact, cocaine isn't the overriding reason for Tiffany's general state of edginess, but it can't exactly be helping.

Three: the nature of her relationship with the Executive itself. Which would spook just about *anybody*, let's be honest. It's tempting to call their arrangement "Faustian," but the contract wasn't signed in anything as startling as blood and so far the Executive has shown her nothing but goodwill. Besides, if Tiffany were just a little more culture-aware then the idea of a pop star entering a pact with daemons would sound altogether too much like a '70s rock opera. If she's done a deal with anything, it's with culture-in-general. But the Executive still freaks her out anyway.

Four: wait and see.

0.24 Distracted

For the last few minutes the girl has been breathing, then not breathing, then breathing, then not breathing. Valentine, who falls into these little War-time superstitions faster than he might like to admit, has found himself believing that her lungs are in some way linked to the invisible, unpredictable pattern of the square itself. That if the blinking lights, the electrical currents and the shouts of the fire-fighters all synch up then everything will start working properly, the girl's internal organs included.

He still hasn't removed the girl's mask, and he's starting to realise, consciously, that it's helping him make sense of the situation. The irregular beat of her breath. The hissing, crackling noise behind the fake-bone. The long, awkward pauses.

Coz has arrived by now, having given up on the wounded drunk, but his presence isn't exactly helping. He stands over the fallen girl, still swaying a little on his legs, with so many folds of saggy flesh around his eyes that Valentine wonders if all the weight from the man's thighs has ended up settling in his eyeballs instead. Coz looks

awful. It's been a long, long day for him. Now Valentine's *trying* to make it clear that he's looking up at his partner expectantly, waiting for suggestions, but Coz isn't taking the hint. Indeed, he doesn't yet seem to have identified the mass of skin, hair and artificial fibres in front of him as a human being at all.

'I can't do anything,' Valentine points out, hoping to get a reaction. 'Something's got to be damaged. She's *trying* to breathe, but… listen.'

'Yeah,' says Coz. That's all. Just "yeah".'

'So… we'd better get her to casualty,' Valentine tries. In fact, right now a run to the hospital isn't what he really needs, but he doesn't exactly have a choice.

'Right,' says Coz.

By the time Valentine looks up again, Coz has already turned away and started to walk back across the square, towards the side-street where the ambulance is parked. Valentine has no option but to follow. Coz has the muscles of a man who's spent half a lifetime lifting the lame and fighting off angry relatives, and on most nights he'd easily be able to single-handedly lug a stretcher from the ambulance to the pavement outside the arcade, but… right now, Valentine isn't inclined to let his partner out of his sight. It's by no means certain that by the time Coz reaches the ambulance, he'll remember what he went there for.

Valentine strokes the girl's hair one more time before he goes, hoping to God that from the outside it doesn't look creepy or disturbing. He mumbles an 'it's going to be all right' to her as he walks away, although in all honesty he's talking about much bigger things than just her own health.

0.25 Both Aries

Valentine is not, in the conventional sense of the word, superstitious. Of course, he believes certain things which he knows—rationally, anyway—to be completely untrue. Like every other human being he secretly believes he's the centre of the universe, meaning, that he's the lead character in the great universal narrative. He knows that in the grand scheme of things he's nothing but dust, a very very small collection of bits-and-pieces set against the overwhelming weight of the world, but obviously this isn't a thought he likes to dwell on.

This superstition, that anything you do makes *any* kind of sense on the grand scale, is only right and proper. It's the ridiculous, impossible, great and unarguable superstition which makes the whole

of humanity possible. In Valentine's case there's the smallest of differences, in that he's unusually aware of it, because he's been giving things a greater-than-average amount of thought recently. He's not a person who takes things casually, his own appearance excepted.

However, in the more *mystical* sense of the word "superstitious": not at all, no.

Coz, on the other hand, is the kind of person who sees the astrology section as being the core of any newspaper, the all-important centre-page around which all other news stories revolve. Valentine has the sneaking, dreadful feeling that when *he's* been riding ambulances as long as Coz, he will have absorbed so many death-anecdotes and last-breath pieces of wisdom that he'll be just the same. If one dying woman tells you she foresaw the date of her death then it's a coincidence, but the trouble with being a crewman is that you're exposed to a damn sight more of those coincidences than just about anybody else. It's bound to get to you, eventually.

All of which assumes he's going to live through the rest of the night. But his horoscope from the *Sun* for the next twenty-three-and-a-half hours, as it was read to him by Coz in the hospital rec room earlier on: 'Once the worst is over, don't worry. Everything will be solved in one moment of clarity.'

0.26 Enough Tape

Tiffany has her televisions now. She's turned the sound down on all of them, something which took some time as it required her to work out how to use twenty-two different sets of controls. It was only once she finished that Danzael arrived, causing the hotel boy to make an immediate retreat, saying 'well, if there's anything else you need, just…' in the language of shrugging.

Technically, Danzael is a member of the Executive. You can tell that just by looking at him, and it's enough to scare off most people. On this occasion, Danzael blatantly enjoyed *sliding* into the room, his face —such as it is—slowly appearing around the side of the half-open door. The sinister edge marred a little by the two fully-stuffed carrier-bags in his hands.

He's the only one that Tiffany would trust with this errand. He's part of the Executive, yes, and she's got a *duty* to defy the Executive's less important orders. It's part of her role as a pop icon, and the Executive's occasionally come close to telling her as much to her face. But she has difficulty imagining Danzael telling the other Executive members anything at all. He's only in this for the kicks, although

judging by his voice he's old enough to know better. Orders or no orders, he'll indulge in any little corruption that comes his way. Which technically means Tiffany shouldn't trust him with any task, but never mind that now.

By now Danzael's closed the door behind him, shut out the rest of the world and emptied out the carrier-bags onto the floor, forming a great ungainly heap of black and white plastic. Videotapes: several dozen of them. Tiffany's already feeding them into the VCR machines and winding through them one by one. Danzael lurks at the back of the room, in close orbit of the mini-bar.

'I had to go to a lot of trouble to get these, you know,' he says. He sounds amused. Possibly he's thinking of asking for a bonus.

Tiffany grunts, but not in the sexy way that she usually uses to mark the end of a chorus. 'Don't you know all the TV people?' she asks.

'Hmmm. Most of these aren't official recordings. They were taken by the crowd.'

'Oh. Are they allowed to do that?'

Danzael doesn't respond to this. Tiffany gets the feeling that he's raising an eyebrow, behind the mask.

Of course they're not allowed to do that. But they're helping with her reproductive process, so it's not as if the Executive would have any reason to stop them. In fact the other members will probably be disappointed that Tiffany's had all the tapes hi-jacked, but in the scheme of things these few images can't represent more than one-billionth of her current overall mass.

0.27 The House of Marrero

The House of Marrero is parked outside, in the forecourt of the stopover, its great, ugly mass sinking into the tarmac at an odd angle thanks to the unpredictable suspension (black tarmac that's currently spattered with blood… actually far less sinister than it sounds, but we'll come to this). For the record, the van was third-hand—and looked third-hand—when Horror got hold of it. Half of the black paint was already there, and the other half was a result of an abortive attempt to make the machine shiny again. The half-used paint canisters are still in the back.

Now, Inangela isn't a great one for machines. Like most of her generation, she enjoys using technology because when she was a child she was told that in the future there *would* be technology. She hates vinyl LPs because they remind her of crushed animals, likes compact

discs because they're shiny and silver and look like things that astronauts use to cook dinner, and is awaiting the day when she can plug music recordings straight into her spinal column or something. But the technicalities of these things are of no interest to her at all, and let's be honest, she gets bored easily anyway. She likes to use whatever comes to hand.

So she's not the kind of person who habitually does things like giving names to vehicles, especially since the House of Marrero is technically owned by Horror rather than Inangela herself (Horror has no decent surname, and the House of Horror is a terrible name for a car under any circumstances). But this van is more than transportation. It's a birthright. Although neither Inangela nor Horror are planning on having children ever, they still harbour thoughts of gaining some kind of junior offspring—'maybe,' Horror has suggested, 'we could grow something in a bowl and stamp on it when we get fed up'—then showing it the House and saying, 'someday, child, all of this will be yours.'

Inangela likes the idea of having a birthright, of having a family seat. She's an aristocrat at heart, just a very poor one who has no compunction about leaving snack wrappers on the floor of her mobile, four-wheeled, one-indicatored estate. It's good to have a family seat that can scare the shit out of the ordinary people by taking tight corners at 80 MPH and making *really* big screeching noises.

0.28 Inventory of Items Purchased from the Stopover:

—Four pies, or pie-shaped things. The stopover sells them wrapped in plain paper, to give them that hand-made feel, something which Inangela appreciates. Four is probably excessive, though. For one confused moment she wonders what's in the fourth of the four pies, briefly believing that the other three contain frog, pig and bear.

—Five pepperoni-sticks. Yes: five. Horror likes these. Each wrapper has a curiously mystical-looking cartoon eye printed on the side, and Inangela considers it odd that a meat-based product should advertise itself with animal parts that really shouldn't be contained in the sticks themselves. This makes her imagine animals harvested specially for their eyes, perhaps looking like the many-eyed things from the Book of Revelations, which once again makes her wonder what the fourth of the animals is and *the Muppets are singing it's very distracting*.

—Two packets of caffeine pills. Inangela now feels much more focused, musical numbers notwithstanding. She doesn't even have to

take any. She just has to know she can.

—A magazine. The cheapest one available. It's traditional.

—One chocolate bar, which slides neatly into Inangela's coat pocket, right next to the single sleeveless videotape she's carrying.

0.29 Last Spin of the Wheel

By the time the first fire crew arrived to put out the blaze in the South American restaurant, the upper floor was already flambéd in the four-star style. Distracted by the fire at the front of the building, nobody paid enough attention to the fire spreading down the rear stairs, or checked the building's gas and electrical points.

So when the building explodes it's something of a surprise, given that from the outside it looks as if the fire's nearly out. The explosion carries most of the building's contents—furniture, food supplies, dishwasher parts and refrigerator doors—along with it. Most of the material burns up, very briefly filling the square with the hit of a thousand kinds of exotic flesh before the sensation's blotted out by smoke and ashes. All that survives is kitchen-shrapnel.

Valentine and Coz are outside the arcade when it happens. They've been attempting to move the girl in the mask onto a stretcher—Valentine not wanting to touch any part of her body in case it makes her stop breathing for good, Coz handling her as if she were a corpse already—but up until this point their attempts have been as awkward and as erratic as her breathing. Now, all of a sudden, there are pieces of burning debris cracking open the pavements and there's no time for politeness. Clumsily, but quickly, the girl gets hoisted onto the stretcher and to hell with the consequences.

As they haul her off to the ambulance, she chokes three times behind the mask and then falls silent.

0.30 The Lay of the Land

Father Danzael is standing on the roof of the hotel, not exactly at the dead centre of the town (the architecture isn't that convenient, symbolically speaking) but as close as you can get while still retaining a good view. People have a tendency to do this, when they want to feel they're addressing the culture-in-general. The truth is that if you were to stand on top of the tallest building that ever existed, you'd be able to see such a small percentage of the culture-in-general—or rather, its outward, skin-of-the-world signs—that you might as well stay on the ground, but height is important to human beings. No

primal challenge was ever won by an ape who couldn't climb rocks.

And besides… is there that lurking need, to try to "read" the skin-of-the-world? The sense that you'll be able to make out those mystical, geological, faux-random patterns down at ground level? Almost certainly, especially if you happen to be slightly drunk, as is Father Danzael.

From here all you can really see are ringroads in white light, tower-blocks lit by unreadable sequences of lit/ unlit/ unlit/ lit/ lit/ unlit windows, ad hoardings lit by half-interested lamps that only show the top halves of the product names. Looking at it from here, you'd never believe there was any kind of greater culture at work below the streets. You see small patches of territory, some owned by individuals, some owned by corporations, some owned by the public. Jostling with each other to fill space. A natural selection of geography.

Territory. It's all about territory. All wars are. When you're young you're taught the story-book version, told that wars begin when the Prince of Micronesia insults the Duchess of Grand Fenwick, or when King A covets the wife of King B and sends armies to their deaths in order to capture her. But no war was ever fought that way. It's all about land: always. Even when race and religion are there to provide the window-dressing. (Helen of Troy was not a great-looking woman. The King of Sparta needed her as his wife in order to legitimise his claim to the throne. No idiot would have gone through all that business with the horse otherwise.)

All wars are about land. Until now, and except for this. This War so great that it exists in the singular, so fundamental that the space in which it exists is virtually irrelevant. It manifests itself here just to prove its existence.

Father Danzael, meanwhile, is part of a group which has its own definition of "territory." Not that he has any real reason for surveying this part of the world from up here, other than the fact that he's had half a bottle of something "complimentary" and needs to clear his head. So he tips his head back, opens his nostrils and breathes in. He's wearing the mask that befits a senior member of the Executive, obviously, but he can still suck in air from across the townscape. It smells of cordite and garlic.

0.31 The Runaway

Danzael's left the room now, possibly in search of prostitutes, or just young women whom he can falsely promise to put in Tiffany's personal retinue. Assuming he's heterosexual, that is (hard evidence is

thin on the ground). This leaves Tiffany with a maximum of twenty-two copies of herself, although at any one time she'll be missing from five or six of the screens, as the cameramen in the crowd zoom in on the backing band, the scenery or the backs of their girlfriends' heads.

She has no idea whether her performance was any good. The sound's still down on the TV sets, and her numerous image-selves have become abstract quantities, collections of poses and pouts which she no longer sees as being recordings of her own flesh. Her eyes slip from screen to screen, trying to lock the images together, to superimpose and assemble. Cocaine helps make your eyes move fast.

What she's *actually* doing, though she'd have trouble vocalising it, is trying to see the performance from all twenty-two angles at once. Looking for what might be called continuity errors. The hardest part was synching up all of the tapes, so that exactly the same moment is always playing across the screens, and she's done a pretty good job as any lapses aren't more than a split-second in length (the Executive could probably provide her with a special machine for this, but she knows it wouldn't be wise to ask). Sometimes one tape or another rapidly skips out of time, as someone in the audience stops his camcorder during one of the Slow Numbers to go and get a hot dog.

There: for one brief moment, she was on all the screens at once. She lifts her arm into the air on stage, revealing one sweat-soaked armpit to the audience, something which she's been told triggers an instant sexual response in something-per-cent of the hetero male audience. Arm still in the air, she turns a little to the camera's right; a little to her left; a little away from the band; a little towards the group of Faction wannabes at the front of the audience pit; frames herself in the light from the burger concession. All of these things are true, depending on which screen you're looking at. She snaps her head straight to her right; looks away from the camcorder owner with the shaky hands on the far edge of the arena; seems to be turning her nose up at the Faction bunch; gives the TV camera at the back of the stage a good chance for a butt-shot.

Hold on. Head to the *right*. Looking *away* from the arena's edge…

No, that makes sense.

Wait… wait, though…

Head to the *right*. Looking *over* the heads of the Faction people…

She tries to focus, on the same five cameras. But the images are running away from each other. One of the five is meaningless, as the camcorder owner goes searching for a useable toilet. The others flicker onto other things. The official TV camera has moved on from her backside to her drummer.

Maybe it's the cocaine talking, but it seems pretty clear to her that something is wrong here. That it's finally happened. That just for a second, one of those images wasn't *her*. And if that's true then does the Executive know, and does the Executive care, and was the Executive responsible and is it really *her* Executive anyway?

And then there's a knock at the door.

0.32 Ground Level (1)

Patterns on the ground. It's all about the patterns on the ground

Insects can leave scent-trails behind them, marking out complex unconscious structures in the dirt, tracing the shape of all the ground they own. Even mammals feel the need to ceremonially urinate, occasionally. But human beings are better than piss and formic acid. Human beings have culture. Understand shape. Understand symbols.

Nobody ever believes it, when they see the landscape from the air and see the shapes that were put there by their ancestors: the strange astrologies, the lines of force, the still-born animal shapes on the ground that take on new eyes, new limbs and new cancers with the building of every new road or tower block. Nobody believes that people who couldn't fly would tear scars across the fields in the shape of dream-images and mystery creatures. Because you never notice the thing on the ground until it swallows you. Why would the ancients go to all this bother? Could they levitate? Wrench themselves out of their bodies with drugs, and look down at the finished work? What's the point?

The point is obvious. They all believed giants were in the ground. They had to mark out the territory. To overwrite the things that might have been there already, the footprints left by those there before them, or those lying in wait under the soil who still might write secret, invisible curses among the roots. They had to write big, the ancients. As soon as they could write, they knew they had to write big.

It's all about territory, even now. Look at this town, with its ringroads and its shocking red warning signs. See how the corporations and the homeowners, the town-planners and the renegade builders, all try to write bigger than each other inside the great, bloody pentagon of its perimeter. One great urban zoology, so you never know where one beast ends and the next begins. Are you really doubting, even for one second, that there really *are* things buried under a town like this? You know it instinctively, in a way that only an anthropologist could ever explain and only a ritualist could

ever exploit. You've found yourself walking in patterns without knowing why. You've driven around the curves of the overpasses "once more for good luck," just to make sure you've drawn the route properly.

Patterns in the ground. Not as simple as they used to be. Valentine, for instance, is one of the few who's tried to keep track of this War—who's tried to make sense of the strategy in the blast-sites and the lines between the attack craters, but he knows it's just turning into a kind of divination and it's a depressing thought. The War writes itself across the world in letters big enough to make him feel helpless, to make the whole of the town and the whole of the world feel helpless, and maybe that's the point.

But that's just one perspective. There are others. Example:

0.33 Ground Level (2)

It's Inangela who's perhaps the most conscious of patterns in the ground, and she's certainly the one who spends the most time wondering what might lie in wait underneath it. Like many of her exotic beliefs, this comes from childhood. Children really are very good at getting involved in the world's more visceral rituals.

Most adolescent rituals are about destruction. Tearing things up, burning them down, blowing them apart if possible… at least, this is the way Inangela remembers life as a twelve-year-old. Leaving aside the polite middle-class life on the *inside* of the house, with all its lists and catalogues, in her mind her later childhood was a garden of fires and smoke-clouds, of packs of giggling, sadistic, elf-like children moving half-seen through the streets in the dead of night. Of darkened landscapes made up of bits and pieces salvaged from scrapyards. Broken doors that lead nowhere, propped up against stacks of bricks. Burning rubbish and scorched, hostile, haunted tree-roots.

The children steal a car, drive it to the edge of the estate in the near-dark, then make a Guy-Fawkes-man out of spare parts from the tip and put the bucket-headed figure in the driver's seat. They name it after someone they hate—always an authority figure—usually a teacher at the local school. These little pubescent tribal destroyers, claiming to be beyond all the rules, still think enough of their supposed lords and masters to want to kill teachers instead of anything more dangerous.

Ultimately, of course, they set fire to it. Often sending the homunculus-teacher into the afterlife with a whole host of parting gifts, anything from the tip that might reduce the pretend-man's

dignity further, any stolen items they might want to dispose of before dawn.

The ritual which Inangela remembers most, and in which she herself was involved rather than being a mere spectator, was the theft of "Neighbourhood Watch" signs. This was later, when she was fifteen or so. By age fifteen you have a sense of irony. Stealing Neighbourhood Watch signs—the ultimate smartarsed tribal custom, a far more powerful act than the more mundane boy-gang initiation of nicking a porn mag from a newsagent's. Neighbourhood Watch signs make people feel… slightly more comfortable. They're like holding-glyphs, and holding-glyphs have to be placed with precision. You can't reign in a daemon by almost surrounding it with the appropriate symbols. Six signs, removed and/ or destroyed by Inangela's pack. Six cracks in the safety pattern that kept the town secure.

0.34 Flexing

It was around this point that Inangela began to consciously notice what all urban human beings suspect. That there was definitely, and profoundly, something under the ground. That the warding-glyphs and holding-glyphs were keeping it in place, pinning it down, reigning in the beast. That now the pattern was incomplete, the Great Urban Horror could… well, perhaps not escape, but certainly flex a muscle or two. Begin moving towards the ground. Extend a claw to write something on the underside of the town's skin. Write curses.

And not five years later, the town ended up being caught in the crossfire of a monumentally destructive and inexplicable War, almost as if something had summoned it there. In the hope, perhaps, that the rockets would tear open some more key points in the town's structure and let the Great Urban Horror go free. Which would technically make the War Inangela's fault, wouldn't it?

0.35 Ground Level (3)

And then there's Tiffany Korta.

Tiffany is different. Tiffany has less appreciation of the concept of "space" than anyone else around here, and perhaps that's less than surprising. Her Executive would offer one explanation—they'd point out that as Tiffany exists in so many places at once, her image and identity spread over videotapes and digital recordings all over the human world, the "original" version is bound to feel a kind of dislocation and become… well, maybe not omnipresent, but getting there. On the other hand, you could argue Tiffany doesn't understand

space properly just because she's conditioned not to. Her sponsors, patrons, managers and advisers move her from scene to scene at whim, from one stage to the next, never letting her see anything in-between. No travelling, other than the non-sense of private air transport.

During the First Gulf War, it was said that several American celebrities were too scared to fly to public appearances in Europe because of 'the threat posed by the conflict.' Nobody understood this, until somebody in Europe realised that to them, everywhere that wasn't America was the same place. Space folds in on itself, and the shellfire over Kuwait superimposes itself over the sky in London. And Tiffany, who already sees herself as being flattened and spread across the information superhighway… she's raised the art of not-being-anywhere to new heights.

But she *does* see the patterns, and she does see connections. Of a kind. She knows about the inner sanctum of her record company. She thinks of it as the temple-headquarters of the Executive, even though it really only exists as a series of 'phone calls and fax messages between the Executive's nine members. She knows about the media—she sees it as a chain of conceptual spaces, with its own map of links and branches, occasionally intersecting with physical-yet-strangely-disconnected locations like TV studios and radio stations. She knows there's definitely such a locale as (say) *Hit* magazine, but one day it might exist at a table in a well-known restaurant, and the next it might exist in the foyer of an airport.

You know, she's undergoing a fascinating transformation. What's most interesting, though, is that despite this lack of space she feels more or less the same way as Valentine and Inangela (the human brain evolved to understand space, after all, and it's not going to give up now). She sees connections between virtual and cultural events as if they were locations, and just like everyone else she's come to the conclusion that there are patterns hidden *inside* those connections.

That there's something inside the culture, and deep down it's why she's so anxious about checking her appearances on video. One frame out of place and it could escape.

0.36 Posture

'Yeah, but you don't really *believe* that, though, do you?' says Horror. 'You don't really think there's something buried under the town.'

'I believe things you wouldn't believe I believe,' replies Inangela.

‘Oh, grow up,’ says Horror.

She’s right. Inangela really should have put on her bone-mask before saying that. It would have given her so much more authority, or at the very least, it would have allowed her to claim that she was being ironically melodramatic. Faction masks are good for that.

0.37 Continuity

‘I’m not sure I understand,’ says Father Danzael. He’s pacing the room behind Tiffany as she sits, cross-legged and anxious, in front of the mass of TV sets. His big black leathery coat’s making sweesh noises across the artificial-fibre carpet, but he’s too bulky to look as if he’s hovering. Not that he’d care.

Tiffany is struggling. She’s trying to ignore all the tapes except the relevant five, which she’s rewound to roughly the right places, but her hands are shaking and she needs cocaine to steady her nerves (don’t you *dare* laugh) and she can’t synch them up properly. Her last attempt came closest to the mark, but Danzael was rather inconsiderately looking the wrong way at the time.

‘There, see?’ she says. It’s a lame effort: she’s synched two of the tapes together, and she’s trying to concentrate on those. ‘That’s not right. Y’know?’

‘You don’t think it’s “right”…?’

‘My head. I’m snapping my head to the right, yeah? I *always* snap my head to the right like that. Look. But…’ she tries to pause the two tapes, fails, and then starts trying to rewind them. The machines move at different speeds, sadly. ‘…but I’m looking… I’m looking over the heads of the weirdos. The guys in the masks.’

‘Mmmm.’ Is he humouring her, possibly?

‘I should be looking away from the guys in the masks.’ Finally, Tiffany looks up at him, and the next words come perilously close to making her sound like a child: ‘Shouldn’t I?’

‘A different group of “weirdos”?’ suggests Danzael. ‘There were a lot of them about. I understand the look’s quite fashionable.’

He strokes the chin of his own mask as he says it, pushing the point home, but Tiffany shakes her head and keeps trying to re-summon the one moment of crisis. ‘It was wrong. You could *tell* it was wrong.’

‘Could I?’

‘I think it’s… y’know.’

‘I know?’

This is the point when she makes her decision. She's already told Danzael about this, even though it might not be tactically wise—she could barely help it, given her sense of shock just before he knocked on the door—but here she'd really have to cross the Rubicon, if she knew the meaning of the word.

'I want to talk to the Executive,' she announces.

Her voice is, however, less impressively sonorous than Danzael's. Except during the middle-eight of "Time on Your Side," for some reason.

'Speaking,' says Danzael.

'No, I mean, the Executive. All of you.'

'A-hah,' says Danzael.

0.38 Blooding

Inangela's motivation in performing her glucose-fuelled, maximum-carbohydrate ritual is there for all to see. Because she's a *pop* person, she has the sneaking suspicion that if she re-invents millennia of mystical thought in this way then Faction Paradox (i.e. the real, mythical Faction Paradox) will make itself known to her, inform her that as a Chosen One she's passed the initiation, and give her the opportunity to join.

Because she's a *very* pop person, she intends to really, really prove her superiority by turning the Faction down. Initiations are complicated like that. To an extent she's just doing her duty as one of the new and immaculately-dressed generation of ritualists, but more crucially it's an obvious effort to make the world—at least her world—marginally more interesting.

Now, Inangela remembers, very well, the night that the old Princess of Wales died. She was fifteen at the time. Like many (if not most) people of her age, she always had a vague dislike of royalty of any kind—not for any overtly political reasons but just because she felt they were chronically hopeless at the job, being far less capable and far less notable than… well… her, for a start. (A sense of frustrated destiny rather than jealousy. The two feel completely different, and only look alike to people on the outside.) Inangela was up late that particular night, caffeine-pilling her way towards dawn, when the news reports about the car crash started coming in. Nothing critical, at first. Just 'we're getting reports of an accident…,' couched in that special newsreader way which suggests '…and we're not going to tell you everything *just* yet.'

And hearing this, Inangela thought about the Princess and said, out loud to the screen: 'Oh, *please* be dead.'

After all, her generation had never seen a royal death before, let alone one as brutal and as stupid as a car crash. 'Oh, *please* be dead. Things would be so much more interesting.'

She felt very, very guilty in the following weeks. Not because she'd wished someone dead, of course—a Princess isn't a real person any more than the racoon on a chocolate wrapper qualifies as a real species—but because that early-hours wish, fuelled by the vicious, ritual effects of the caffeine tabs, had backfired horribly in the way that most wishes do. The world became anything but "interesting." It spent months trapped in a tyranny of good taste and sensitivity, where no opinion was tolerated but the correct one and certain words were exiled from the English language altogether. It's what happens, when you show people death on that level of celebrity.

I made a bad wish, and it made the world a much less interesting place.

A week later, the homeless girl who used to hang around two streets away from Inangela's house died after she coughed up her own throat-lining. Naturally, nobody gave a damn about this even though the girl was vastly more interesting than the Princess, and once told Inangela a fantastic (but entirely unproven) rumour about the way soldiers were brainwashed to fight in the War. It probably goes without saying that it was over a day before anyone moved the corpse.

At this stage, Inangela had never heard of Faction Paradox. This didn't stop her collecting some of the left-over blood from the pavement, scraping up flecks from the girl's throat that could have been teeming with any number of narcotics. She must have instinctively known that they'd come in useful later.

0.39 Safety

The girl in the mask is lying on her stretcher in the ambulance, and it's remarkable how different she looks. Here in the back of a sterility-white "meat van," cut off from the flashing red lights of the square, she doesn't look anything like a casualty of War.

Let's be honest, she just looks dead. The fact that one arm's crossed over her chest doesn't help, although as far as death-imagery's concerned it's hard to ignore the mask. She's lying absolutely still now, and Valentine's hovering over her, lowering his head to her chest but making sure not to touch her torso. The breathing's not only erratic, it's quite obviously *pained*. Each breath drawn out as long as possible, her lungs obviously knowing that they've only got so many

chances left.

Now Valentine raises his head, to look at Coz. Coz is standing on the other side of the ambulance's rear doors, his big, gangling body spread out across the opening like a spider-monkey—one hand resting on the top-left corner of the door-frame, one hand on the top-right. The message is plain. It now takes the weight of an entire vehicle to stop him falling over. There's sweat all over the great bald expanse of his skull, and the lamplight just slides off it. Unlike Valentine, he doesn't seem concerned by the injured girl at all. Instead his attention's focused elsewhere. Apparently on the burning, crackling South American restaurant.

'Does this… look like a collapsed lung to you?' Valentine asks, cautiously.

Coz spends a moment or two more looking into the fire. Then turns his head.

'Can you smell something?' he grunts.

As a matter of fact, Valentine can: a gutted restaurant will confuse the primal human senses like nothing else in the world, gas or no gas. But he's not to be swayed.

'I don't think it's a collapsed lung,' he says, insistently. 'I think it's something else. Internal damage. I don't think we can do anything for her before we get to hospital.'

'Uhhn,' agrees Coz. 'She's not going to make it.'

This thought has occurred to Valentine, but he really, really didn't want anyone to say it out loud. Without keeping his ear to the girl's body he can no longer hear a single thing from behind the mask.

'I can drive,' he says. He doesn't trust Coz to get *anywhere* in a hurry right now.

Coz shrugs, but his attention's already turned back to the fire.

'Sure I can smell something,' he says. Then, unexpectedly, he takes a deep breath through his mouth. Valentine gets the feeling that he's trying to flood his lungs with fresh air, though God knows what's in his body that's bad enough to make fire-smoke a preferable option.

And then suddenly Coz is gone, his big, ageing, uniformed monkey-shape vanishing from the rear doorway of the ambulance. Valentine is frankly surprised the man can move so fast. It reminds him of the explosion at the front of the restaurant, but this time in reverse, as some uncanny force rips Coz away from the vehicle and pulls him across the square at high velocity.

0.40 Non-Sequitur, #1

Only one side of the telephone conversation was recorded. Bugging the ‘phone proved to be impractical, for the simple reason that it was hard to know which ‘phone to bug. The individuals who happened to be under surveillance had a certain reluctance to use the land-line registered to the house, and took to using mobile ‘phones instead. They changed numbers every few days, which shows some wisdom, at least.

Not quite enough, though, because it never seemed to occur to them that the house itself might be monitored. Fancy that. Technology was on their side, but simple geography let them down.

The side of the conversation which ended up on tape, the harsh, metallic, badly-disguised woman’s voice with its muted accent and nicotine aftertaste, went like this:

‘Go. [1]

‘Yes.

‘Yes.

‘We understand that, Mr. Orphée [2]. We appreciate your position. This isn’t your area of expertise.

‘We know. Yes.

‘We’re sure. You’ve seen the same information as the rest of us. I’m sure I don’t need to explain everything.

‘I know you do, Mr. Orphée [3]. We understand. That’s why we trust you.

‘No.

‘No. Our sources are reliable. You can see that. There’s no other possibility.

‘Apart from a Ship?

‘No. There’s no other possibility. Only a Ship. [4]

‘Not now. It’s already been buried. What did you expect?

‘I can’t tell you that yet, Mr. Orphée.

‘I appreciate that. We’re glad you understand.

‘Yes.

‘Yes.’

0.41 Footnotes to the Above

1. “Go” meaning “safe,” i.e. “you can start talking.”

2. The voice on the ‘phone isn’t talking to a superior. At best there’s a bank-teller formality about the way she says “Mr. Orphée,” and at worst there’s an anger and an impatience that have to be held in check with military precision. Or maybe it’s just the distortion on the recording that makes her sound like this, like an old-fashioned razor scraping across the skin and occasionally pushing hard enough to break the skin.

3. A codename, surely. It’s doubtful that you’d find any Orphées in the ‘phone book, or even on the ex-directory register. This town’s inhabitants aren’t inclined to be born with names quite so exotic.

4. Ah. Herein lies a tale.

0.42 Invisibility Spell

The House of Marrero doesn’t have any locks. Not locks that work, anyway. Inangela’s friends (such as they are) like to make the obvious comment that nobody would ever want to steal it, but this is clearly untrue. Joyriders like nothing better than a big, loud, dangerous pile of clanking machine-parts that makes a massive cartoon impact when you use it to drive it into a wall.

Inangela has her own security device. She uses blood and she uses ritual, almost as if she were auditioning for Faction Paradox (because ‘you never know when someone might be watching’) already. Whenever the machine gets parked she takes the tin out of the glove compartment, opens it up and scatters a little of the blood inside all around the van, in a loose circle. At least, she calls the material in the tin “blood,” although by her own admission blood (of the dried variety) is just one of many carefully-refined ingredients. Its effect, so she says, is to form a ward—a ward not simply against theft, but also against parking tickets and petty vandalism.

The blood she used is, ostensibly, the blood of the homeless girl who died down the road from her exactly one week after the passing of the old Princess of Wales. It makes sense. Aristocrats might like to think that their blood’s somehow superior, but if the Princess proved one thing then it was that a noble birthright just isn’t the issue. Some people have *glamour* in their veins. The dead girl, on the other hand, had anti-glamour. The ability (genetic, or acquired?) to be culturally irrelevant. As a result, the blood-rite has ensured that despite over three years of stupid parking, the House of Marrero has never, ever been noticed. Anything within the circle ceases to be a meaningful part of the culture.

On average, Inangela has used the blood-rite twice every day across that three-year period. Horror has never bothered asking when the small amount of blood that Inangela collected from the dead girl's body is going to run out. One time she returned to the van to find that a traffic warden had slapped tickets onto every car on the road *except* the House of Marrero, which is supporting evidence for Inangela's claims but inconclusive. There's always the possibility that nobody goes near the vehicle because they think a van surrounded by blood is an official crime scene of some description, not to mention the possibility that Inangela personally printed up some fake tickets and put them on everybody else's cars just to prove a point. It wouldn't be beyond someone in self-training to be part of Faction Paradox.

0.43 Faction Paradox

Impossible to say where the idea of Faction Paradox came from. Easy to say how it became popular.

It's the War. Fashion always tends toward the outré, when there's a war. It's like Vietnam and the Hippies. It's like the Great British Psychosis, the distortion of time that took place during World War Two, locking the nation in a state of permanent illusory Empire at the very last moment when it actually held any power. (See how the alteration of time-perception is always important to the process? Even the hippies had their LSD.) The original Faction Paradox, if there ever was such an animal, could have been anything. It could have been the result of a conscious, deliberately-planned project, devised by artists or musicians or ritualists. Alternatively it could have been a corporate marketing campaign that fell by the wayside, and got recycled by some club promoter who fished the first few prototype masks out of the bins behind the offices and thought they'd look good on a fly-poster. But it didn't take long for the Faction to plant itself inside the mythology of War-time. Naturally, in this scheme of things Faction Paradox is the only force—young, creative, dynamic, fetishistic—capable of derailing the War, as if the minority who wear the masks are serious opponents for whatever higher powers might currently be taking the town to pieces. Again, the distortion of time is an important factor, becoming not only a side-effect of the Faction's allegedly mind-expanding techniques but a *weapon*. The name, with its overtones of impossible history, is perfectly-chosen.

Faction Paradox has ostensibly been here since the start of the universe. This is why the posters seem so familiar, children, and not just because you saw them on your way home from a club while you were still off your face, not just because the blacks, whites and glaring

reds smashed their way into your impressionable skulls while you didn't know what you were doing. Faction Paradox is all about history, about breaking a military deadlock that's been around forever, and if it hasn't been around forever yet then that's the way it'll seem soon.

0.44 Sicknote

Valentine eventually finds Coz in a side-alley between the amusement arcade and a less colourful, less conspicuous building which may well be a lap-dancing club of some description. Coz is standing next to the staircase, gripping the iron banister for support, back turned to the square. He's throwing up, and although he's not facing Valentine he's sadly not *completely* facing the other way. Valentine stops halfway down the alley, where the prevailing smell is still meat and burning architecture. Politely, he waits until Coz has finished.

'You, ahh…' he begins.

He's not sure whether he needs to go on. He knows the score here. He knows that Coz knows that he knows the score. But Coz, even now his muscular contractions are over, doesn't turn around. You know… it almost looks like shame.

Valentine decides to sum it up in one word.

'Pills?' he says.

'Huuuuh,' Coz confirms.

Strictly speaking, this is the moment when Valentine must make a decision. In truth he's already made it, but he knows this is the point when things start to change, so he at least reminds himself that this is a moment worth remembering.

'You don't need to go come back with me,' he says.

Coz shakes his head, but keeps his eyes fixed on the ground in front of him, which can't be pleasant.

'We'd better get the girl in,' he says.

'I can do it on my own,' Valentine tells him.

Coz doesn't respond. Doesn't move.

'I'll just tell the others you stayed here,' Valentine goes on, doing his best to sound like a son who's worried about his father and hoping that he doesn't sound like a son who's about to put his father into a home. 'It's a War site, it's not like they're going to ask questions. You know it's a busy night. The Tiffany Korta thing, and…'

He tails off, and waits for Coz to acknowledge him with an: ‘Uhh.’

Outside, there’s the howl of sirens as the fire service reinforcements arrive. Valentine takes a step back, since here in the alley the smell of the burning square is starting to lose the fight against the poison from Coz’s stomach.

‘It’s not a problem,’ Valentine concludes. ‘Really.’

0.45 Primal Buttons

Before Valentine joined the service, Coz used to “specialise” in dead children. He was well-known for it. However random the assignments were supposed to be, it was a dead cert that on any given night the ambulance driven by Coz would roll into the hospital with at least *one* DOA minor on board. When Coz and Valentine started working together on the nightshift things began to change, as if Valentine’s presence had somehow made a big dent in probability away from “kids” and towards “industrial accidents,” but by then the damage had been done.

Theoretically, there’s no difference between the body of a child and the body of a grown-up. In practice, every child is an implicate human —a stripped-down, abstract little bundle of all the things that a human being might possibly be. And it’s so much easier to care about abstracts than about people. It’s why pop stars scratch away every complex detail of their lives and become little more than lists of anecdotes, it’s why it’s easier to care about the death of a cartoon character than a complex human being, and it may even be why Valentine hasn’t yet removed the mask from the girl in the ambulance and turned her into a real person.

It doesn’t matter if you’ve been trained to do the “professional medic” thing, it doesn’t matter if you *think* it doesn’t make a difference to you and it doesn’t matter if you don’t go home every night and dream about burning babies (because it never really works that way). It’s the cumulative effect that wears you down. The cumulative effect of having your primal buttons pushed and your gut-level levers pulled. None of those dead children were worth any more than any of the dead adults, and for all anyone knows half of them could have grown up to be rapists, arms dealers and child-killers, but, but, but but *but*…

0.46 The Pills

But. This is what led Coz to *the pills*. All Valentine knows is that they’re pills made to keep someone moving at all costs, hence Coz’s

bouts of hyperactivity. Which says something, don't you think? Coz doesn't take pills to forget, to be happier or to regulate his blood pressure. He takes pills to make himself faster. The horror (and again, he didn't even know it was horror at the time) has simply made him… slow.

The effect of the pills on his body is plain for all to see, however. Apart from the violent mood-swings, a particularly busy day will require the ingestion of several doses. These extra doses don't mix well with stress, shock or the smell of spicy sausage, and the truth is that at least two of these three elements are almost *de rigeur* for the nightshift. None of the other crews is going to mention this "problem," in the same way they didn't mention it when one of their number took to drink for the same basic reasons and spent four months driving an ambulance while pissed out of his head. Only the management is kept in the dark.

Fundamentally, Coz knows that Valentine is right and that no-one will ask questions when a one-man crew rolls in. To Valentine, who's spent much of the past week wondering how he's going to get rid of Coz on this particular night, it's like a work of providence. "Everything will be solved in one moment of clarity"? Well, so far so good.

0.47 The Coming of Bastard Racoon

There's an advert on the television set, and Inangela's back is freezing from resting against the chiller cabinet. Her time-perception's starting to click back in place. She wonders, only briefly because she's got better things to do, whether she's remembering the last hour in the right order. Was the TV programme she's now remembering actually on, or was it something she saw a long time ago, shifted onto the screen in the White Heaven of the stopover as a kind of mass-broadcast out-of-body experience? Alternatively, was the programme ever made at all? She flirts with the idea that her time perception has shifted to such a degree that it's changed human history, dropping long-dead authors into retro TV shows, but it seems unlikely.

Concentrate! The advert on the TV screen. Animated commercial for something covered in chocolate. On the screen there's a cartoon ad-sprite, a chubby little racoon-creature in the same colours as the snack-wrappers. Black stripes on red, and is that a ring through her nose? Perhaps she's a post-punk racoon. She lives in the woods, but there are children in the bushes and they want her chocolatey goodness. She runs from them, somewhat coquettishly. There's a secret land where *everything* is made of these snacks, and only the

racoon knows how to lead them to the portal, but she *wants* to be caught. Dear God, can't the stupid children see how she wants to be caught? It's a trap! For Christ's sake, it's a trap! This is what pixies do, the bastard lying animal-hybrid scum.

And just for a second Inangela sights the *real* gates of the bastard racoon's kingdom, and knows the animal represents a great and terrible power, and that the power is hidden inside everything she touches, the advert especially. Like all pixie-people, it only shows itself occasionally. It takes human form but it has no body, at least not in the normal sense of the word, and…

The Bastard Racoon is peering at her. Little bright eyes, trying to see into Inangela's desires from under her cropped red corporate hair The animal bristles, and Inangela can see her piercings.

'What?' says Horror.

'*Wuuuh*,' says Inangela. This evidently throws Horror for a second, and she very nearly runs the van off the road.

0.48 Here We Are Back in the Real World

'God,' says Horror, as she re-gains control. 'What was *that* about?'

Inangela shakes her head. There's no good reason for that. It's just what she's seen people do, when they're trying to clear their minds.

'Ahhh,' she says. 'It's all right. I thought I was somewhere else.'

Notably, Inangela doesn't apologise for this outburst. That wouldn't be seemly.

'I think your head's coming off,' says Horror. She makes it sound like a comment about the weather. 'Where did you *think* you were, then?'

'Watching television.'

'Pff. That's a really shit drug you've taken. You could just stay at home and watch television properly.'

'I haven't taken any drugs,' snaps Inangela.

'Oh.'

'It's probably a side-effect of the ritual. I told you, it's a very intense process.' She pauses, then. 'Hor?'

'Yeah?'

'Why does my hand feel squishy?'

Horror glances to one side, but just with her eyes, without turning her head. As Inangela knows, Horror has seen far too many medical dramas in which the week's victim has an accident after looking at the person in the passenger seat.

'You could try *looking* at your hand, if you really want to know,' Horror suggests.

'Will I be really pissed off by what I see, though?'

Horror shrugs. 'D'you get freaked out by melty chocolate bars?'

Ah yes. Now Inangela remembers reaching into her leathery coat pocket, seizing the chocolate within, deciding that there was something fundamentally evil about it and resolving to throw it out of the window.

'Just tell me one thing,' she says, still not looking at the now-boomerang-shaped snack that was once a bar of some description. 'What's on the wrapper?'

'Lots of chocolate,' says Horror, truthfully.

'No, I mean… is there an animal?'

Horror grunts to herself. 'Is this about your "totem animal" thing? 'Cos, you know… I don't think it matters if you eat a chocolate bar with the wrong kind of animal on it…'

'It's not that,' says Inangela, crossly. ("Crossly" is a very different thing to "angrily." It involves the thrusting of hands into pockets, chocolate-covered or not.) 'I just… thought you were a racoon.'

'Right,' says Horror.

0.49 The Coronation

There was a certain occasion, not three weeks ago, which was of particular significance to Inangela and which needs to be recorded here if we're to understand her properly. It was on a night when she and Horror were hanging around in the car park of the local cineplex, a good place for them to hang out, since there are fast-food outlets waiting in the shadows on all sides and there's enough space on the forecourt for a beast of a machine like the House of Marrero.

They'd been there for some time, under the great and all-too-meaningful expanse of the night sky (which, naturally, represents a future of infinite potential as much as it does a vacuum), occasionally threatening to run over the teenage boys who laughed at Inangela's mask or Horror's face. Eventually one of the cinema attendants came out of the building and asked them what they were waiting for, and Horror drawled something like, 'We're waiting for the star premiere,'

which is frankly typical of her. The man from the cineplex said they should leave, but Inangela was fairly hyper at that stage—in retrospect, she admits, shamefully so—and clambered up onto the bonnet of the van, spreading her arms wide and explaining that she was the Queen of the World.

That was when the shockwave hit them. The boom that goes beyond sonic, so everybody within half a mile must have jumped out of their skins, even the Queen of the World. There was a pillar of fire, in the fields and the wastes behind the cineplex, and afterwards the attendant looked so shell-shocked that he couldn't in all conscience ask *anybody* to leave. A pillar of fire, bright as sunburn: the closest Inangela had ever been to any part of the War, until now. But even those who claim to have been closer admitted they'd never seen anything like that before, as if some great and paranoid Ship of War had dumped its entire payload into the ground.

But here's the important thing. The important thing to note about Inangela, with her fetishes and trinkets and very personal, very private mystery artefacts (nothing as impressively alchemical as Red Mercury, perhaps, but particularly urban signifiers nonetheless). A week later, briefly-but-obsessively convinced that she was missing something important, she went out to the field where that attack had left its mark in the earth and lay there—at the dead centre of the crater, in the grey dust and shattered dirt—for forty-four hours of her life. Forty-four hours, cut off from the world as we know it, separated from the foods of convenience and the satellite feed. Is it really such a great sacrifice? Perhaps not, on the grand scale of things. But these are high-velocity times. Mystics of past generations would starve themselves for weeks on end. These days it only takes hours to reach the same level of isolation and awareness and sudden, primal understanding. Is that a bad thing?

0.50 Sleeping

Inangela became aware of something, while she was out there in her wilderness, suffering from forty-four-hour hunger and realising just how small a chemical imbalance it takes to turn a fashion-conscious young woman into a new prophet. There in the crater, she became convinced that there really was something in the ground underneath her. Not an urban-mythical, gut-level horror, the kind she expected when she was so much younger and more prone to believe in things full-time. But real, nonetheless.

Something that needs to be awoken, perhaps? Most teenagers feel that way. That's why they make so much noise, why they try to leave

such brutal scars on the skin of the world, because they can sense something sleeping under the surface and know that life would be so much better and faster and more fascinating if they woke it up. Perhaps that's what this ritual of Inangela's is all about. She tells herself that all this is to do with the protocols of Faction Paradox, but if she's honest with herself then she knows she's just trying to make that wake-up call. Maybe to wake up something in herself, maybe something in the ground, who knows?

The point is this. She half-starved herself to get that far. She may only believe in things for short periods, as any sensible human being does these days, but you can't fault her dedication. When she's got a mission, she's *really* got a mission.

0.51 On Red Mercury

Red Mercury, incidentally, is the most mythical, most meaningful and (with one key exception) most potent of all illegal or semi-legal elements on the market—a power it gains from existing at the intersection of politics, mysticism, organised crime and even fashion. It's therefore the ultimate medium, its reputation not at all harmed by the fact that it sounds as if an alchemist encoded its name. Like any brand, it guarantees that anything bearing it can be sold at higher prices than the more commonplace illicit materials.

The term originates, *seems* to originate in the late 1970s but didn't become widespread until the late 1980s or early 1990s. On a global scale, that time-period has an obvious significance: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the decline of communism, happy Eastern Europeans tearing down statues of Stalin even as they made plans to escape the country or eat their own dogs. To most westerners, the end of the Cold War meant a glorious new age of terrorism, the fear of the chemical rather than the atomic. To the specialist underworlds, it meant a brand new source of supplies.

The label "Red Mercury" was most famously given to material smuggled out of the Soviet Union, the name initially applied to a supposed variant of *literal* mercury (which ostensibly functions as a high-grade trigger in nuclear weaponry). Later, the term broadened its horizons, covering any potentially nuclear matter that emigrating Soviet technicans smuggled out of legendary underground laboratories.

Soon, however, the phrase took on a whole new meaning. After all, would anybody really give a name as dramatic, as *fundamental*, as "Red Mercury" to any common, vulgar quasi-atomic material? No: it implies mystery, and therefore its mystery had to be resolved. It was

clear, said the dealers in such commodities, that Red Mercury served a very specific function. All those spitting, crackling, murky little vials of liquid were just a smokescreen, confused with the true Red Mercury, a creature so powerful that its qualities could only be explained in terms verging on the ritualistic.

By 1991, the "true" Red Mercury had been identified, though its pedigree was unclear. By 1992, it was not only being sold to those who might want to produce their own (limited) nuclear devices in the west, but also—in small doses—to practitioners of *vodan*, to the ritualists and the black chemists of the western Caribbean. These were high times for those who practised *vodan*, Obeah and sundry forms of sympathetic magic. This was the era in which camcorders experienced a massive sales boom in western Africa, as witch doctors realised videotape was a far more efficient way of capturing someone's image than a clay doll. Nuclear material had been, for so many years, the prime *vodan* substance by which the rulers of the east and west had kept their followers under control. Now any ritualist could get hold of it, second hand, for whatever use they saw fit. Like a piece of clothing that's dipped in the blood of a great leader, Red Mercury was matter which had passed through the secret, subterranean research labs of the USSR, picking up not only radiation but the buried secrets of Soviet occult science. This was matter which knew the world, which had a power, and a purpose, all its own.

Not that the dealers kept its origins in mind. Things tend to become over-literal, given time. Before long the traders in this commodity were painting vials of ordinary, humdrum mercury with red nail varnish, in order to give it the correct hue.

0.52 Suite

Tiffany's Executive is staying on a floor of the hotel all to itself. The floor is numbered thirteen-and-a-half, and only certain lifts in the building can access it. Returning to the hotel later, Tiffany will find the staff unwilling to admit that there ever was a thirteenth-and-a-half floor, and all the records will show that Tiffany stayed here all on her own.

No, not really. But it'd be fitting, somehow. When Tiffany and Danzael step out of the lift, into the muted light of the corridor with its velvet décor and its faux-royal red carpet, they find one of the other members already waiting for them. It's Mother Nod, of course. She and Danzael mirror each other perfectly. Whenever Danzael performs an "unseemly" errand for Tiffany, it's always Nod who turns up to fuss about it, to make twittering noises and potter around like a

maid who thinks she's going to have to clean up the mess.

'Where have you *been*?' Nod hoots, obviously addressing Danzael, even if she gives Tiffany a glance making clear who's supposed to suffer the shrapnel of the question. You can't seriously ask a pop star where they've been. Tiffany sometimes wonders what Nod looks like behind her mask, suspecting she'd be like a painting she once saw (or an advert of a painting she once saw), of a lightbulb-headed man with his face squeezed into an enormous scream. Tiffany imagines Mother Nod's face contorted into the same expression, but scrunched into the shape of the mask.

'The Princess wants a word,' says Danzael.

Nod flusters without saying anything, waving her hands in "wait here" expressions. She's probably not sure she should allow this, but is there really any way of stopping it? The Executive is *Tiffany's* Executive, and besides, it's fairly obvious that the other seven members have already assembled in one room.

White-shirted hotel staff are, even now, sweeping in and out through the door. They move as if they're riding unicycles, shifting their body-weights to and fro in order not to spill the drinks. For reasons which really should be obvious, all the drinks have straws.

0.53 Valentine's Rubicon

Valentine crouches on the floor of the ambulance, back against the inside wall, hands cat's-cradled together in front of his face. He's listening, very very carefully. For the most part he's listening for the sound of the girl's lungs, but the rear doors of the ambulance are still wide open, so there's the crackling of the fire and the roar of the fire-hoses and the conversations of the sirens. He doesn't want to get any closer to the girl. He really doesn't.

He's on his own here now. Just him and a girl who may be dead already. He could lean in closer, feel her pulse, risk putting his head to her chest to listen for a beat, but really, her exact biological status no longer seems the issue. Her life or death has, he's sure, already been decided. If you wanted to be cruel you could say that he's just seeing patterns again, beyond the right-here-right-now-ness of the situation. No, he's not superstitious, in the everyday sense. But the rocket attack? The girl? That moment of decision in the alley? Everything seems to fit together here.

Besides, what chance does the girl really have? Even Coz said she was doomed. She'll need surgery, Valentine's in no doubt about that. God knows how long it'll take them to even organise the procedure,

let alone open her up in a bleached room with needle-sharp lights and fix the damage. There's no way, no way in the world, that she's going to make it. Even *if* she's still alive.

But it has to be said, here Valentine's just rationalising. He already knows where this line of thought's leading him, and what he's going to do next, but—as in the alleyway—he wants to make sure of every step on the way. Nothing he does can be casual.

Here we go. He's getting ready to shut the doors, climb into the driving seat and start the engine. He isn't planning on heading for the hospital. He *is* planning on tearing his eyes away from the girl in the mask, but it might take him a few moments.

On three.

One.

Two.

0.54 The Secret Route

The mission has begun. Inangela is on her way towards the edge of town, as unstoppable as her driver is unkillable, to perform the first of the ritual acts which she intends to dedicate to the wholly fictional name of Faction Paradox.

The ritual she intends to perform… no. The ritual she must *inevitably* perform is a form of summoning. Of a particularly urban kind, as befits the rest of her own urban mythology. Summonings aren't new to her, though she's never before attempted anything on this kind of scale. Until now the most tangible thing she's ever called into existence is the Last Bus Home.

(Anyone who lives in a town like this one, who's let the alcohol do its work on their time-perception and gone through adolescence leaving it just that little tiny bit too late to leave the pub after last orders, will tell you all about the Last Bus Home. Sometimes you can catch it, and sometimes you can't. Sometimes you'll think it's too late, that you've got no way back to safety and central-heating and pastrami in the fridge and a better place to sleep than the doorway of an old bookshop, but then the lights will appear from around the corner and the Last Bus Home will change everything you thought you knew about the world. Sometimes you'll wait an hour for it, and more, and it won't come at all and you'll believe that you'll never see home again. There's only one Last Bus Home, and it can be summoned if you know the correct combination of words and actions and props. Inangela knows this better than anyone, which is why she sometimes carries a lighter even though she doesn't smoke, why she insists on

filling her pockets with coins that are no longer legal currency and pieces of litter that mark the secret route it makes through the world.)

Inangela becomes aware, suddenly, that Horror is looking at her. The English word, should anyone ever choose to use it, is “askance.” It’d be going too far to say that Horror looks worried, since Horror automatically assumes that everyone else in the world is as capable of casual survival as she is. If there’s any concern it’s concern that Inangela’s about to bug out and do something embarrassing.

‘What?’ Inangela asks her.

‘You were phasing out again,’ Horror tells her.

Inangela attempts to retain her dignity.

‘I’m just sensitive right now,’ she says, defensively.

Very nearly true. Inangela almost put herself in hospital, when she half-starved herself to the point of revelation. That’s how serious she can be, once she’s decided what to be serious about. She has her pride, but that was thirteen days ago. She’s out of the wilderness now, and she’s spent most of the intervening time recovering, the rest of it just watching television and eating. And planning.

Horror’s still askancing at her. Inangela is seriously thinking about glaring back.

‘I’m not spacing out,’ she says.

‘Huh,’ says Horror.

‘I’m *not*.’

0.55 A to B

‘ ‘Kay,’ says Horror. ‘Which turning d’you want?’

‘Head south-east,’ says Inangela. She knows this, because she’s already checked the local A—Z. ‘We want to go past Miss Ruth’s place on the way back,’ she adds, in the hope that it’ll clarify things.

Horror makes an “uhnn” noise so gutteral, it barely exists at all.

‘We have to tell her about the ritual,’ Inangela explains. ‘It’s bound to affect her.’

‘How?’

‘Because it’ll affect everything.’

‘What, you drawing some pictures on a wall somewhere is going to __’

‘Miss Ruth has a right to know,’ says Inangela, and to get the point across she makes sure that every word is a little louder than the last.

Horror shrugs it off. She at least seems to know where she's going now. The road curves ahead of the House of Marrero, an infinite supply of white street-lamps appearing from around the bend before disappearing into the rear-view mirror. Horror lazily flicks the indicator switch, which may or may not have an effect on the world outside the car, before swerving across the road towards one of the turnings.

From somewhere behind them, there's the sound of a siren. Inangela knows this environment well, but not enough to tell the difference between the three species of emergency vehicle just from the noise. For now, she assumes it's an ambulance rather than a police car. Horror looks at her out of the corner of one eye.

'Keep going,' says Inangela.

0.56 Manifest Destiny

The idea of using videotape as part of the ritual process isn't new, and it certainly isn't unique to the camcorder shamans of West African. In the more media-literate circles of the western world, for example—the kind of circles in which Tiffany's Executive might move, possibly counter-clockwise—there are rumours of a "personal future lifestyle consultant" who's capable of reading someone's past, present and future just by the impact they've made on the world's media.

If you've ever walked past a news camera while the reporter was delivering an on-the-spot report, or been filmed in the crowd at some obscure music festival you thought everyone had forgotten… then she'll know it. She'll know you, and she'll be able to trace your life through that one tiny moment when your existence intersected with the magnetic-tape version of the history of the world.

No celebrity has ever dared face this witch. Just imagine her, prophesying on the life of someone whose image has already been captured on a billion frames of video. She'd know them better than they even know themselves, and faced with that they might cease to exist altogether.

Tiffany Korta has heard this rumour, probably at an Executive party somewhere. She may even have been told exactly where to find this urban legend of a witch-woman, though it's not information she consciously remembers at this stage.

Meanwhile, in the vast and bewildering human landscape of India, those actors who play major deities in the nation's great, mythic, quasi-religious soap operas are treated as if they're the literal living embodiments of the gods and goddesses in question. And who says

they aren't? If you were a god, how the hell would *you* manifest yourself? Given the choice, you'd be safer as an advertising sprite than as a human being.

0.57 Cut to the Chase:

'Police car,' says Horror.

Inangela has been thinking the same thing, but she isn't going to acknowledge it just because Horror's said the words out loud. Until she looks in the wing-mirror, and establishes beyond any reasonable doubt that the wailing, impolite vehicle closing in from behind isn't really just a fire engine, then it doesn't *exist* as a police car.

'Go faster,' says Inangela.

'Uh-huh,' says Horror. 'What if they want us to pull over?'

'Why would they want us to pull over?' snaps Inangela. 'We haven't done anything.' And what she means is: We haven't done anything, yet. What's she going to do, tell people for years to come that she *would* have woken the Great Urban Horror (no relation to *her* Horror, obviously) but that she didn't want to get stopped for speeding?

'We'll be doing over sixty,' Horror points out. 'Plus one of the indicators is fucked...'

'Just go faster,' Inangela says.

Horror hesitates. But not for long. What's the worst that can happen? The police can arrest her, potentially, but Inangela doubts it'd bother Horror a great deal. In fact the two of them met for the first time in the holding cell of a police station, although nobody has yet ascertained what Horror did to get there.

So: 'All right,' says Horror, and there's a *ga-cloonk* as her foot goes down on the pedal. Inangela can't resist it any longer, and as the House of Marrero accelerates along the road she risks a glance at the wing-mirror on her side of the van (this is the same kind of mistake Orpheus made in the underworld, incidentally, except that Orpheus didn't have a wing-mirror and perhaps things would have been very different if he had). But all Inangela sees is a flash of white against a dark background, one big, powerful headlight bouncing off the glass at exactly the right angle to sting her eyes.

'Got to be following us,' says Horror. And the siren's still getting louder.

0.58 The Executive

The Executive has done a fine job of turning the hotel room into its home-from-home, so much so that the space seems to have followed them all the way here from the last hotel where they stayed, and the one before that, and the one before that. There's no bed here, the centrepiece of the room being the enormous semicircular table around which the Executive holds conference, so implacable and so immovable that it *proves* this is the same room. There are red shades over the dimmed lights, casting the seven bone-faces behind the table in the kind of glow that reminds Tiffany of the people she saw by the firework-light.

No embarrassing papier-maché here, though. These masks are the best, leaving Tiffany in no doubt that once again she's in the company of the originals, the artefacts of which all other Faction masks are simply grainy, nth-generation pirate copies. Nor would these nine be seen, dead or otherwise, in standard festival-wear. It's suits all the way for them, in tweed or just plain grey, their hands (some folded on the table in front of them, some gracefully taking drinks from the hotel staff that bustle in and out) hidden in elegant gloves in black leather or red velvet or white lace. Depending on gender and/ or preference.

'Don't you worry about people seeing you like this?' Tiffany once asked, when she was only a very small cultural entity and hadn't seen her Executive meeting in a hotel before. At that stage, she still liked to think of the group as a kind of precious secret.

'No,' one of them told her, with a dismissive and highly-cultured wave of the hand. 'Why would they ever think they were looking at the genuine articles?'

'This is the great thing about everyone following our sense of fashion,' a second—possibly Mother Nod—added. 'It's the ultimate camouflage.'

0.59 Committed

The ritual involves five minor acts of sabotage, all performed in sequence. Originally Inangela wanted to carry out the first act at midnight precisely—not that midnight has any particular importance to either herself or her invisible patrons in Faction Paradox, but… it's midnight, for Heaven's sake, how can you resist midnight?

She tries not to let this bother her. It's always midnight *somewhere*, and Faction Paradox isn't worth a great deal if it can't bend the exact rules of timing just a little.

But now the project's already in jeopardy. The wailing vehicle's still right behind the van, doing everything it can to make Horror pull

over, though fortunately it takes a lot more than loud noises to stop Horror. It takes loud noises *and* a lack of food. Since the House of Marrero has never been pulled over before in all the time Inangela has known it, she has to wonder whether the police are after her on this particular night just to stop the summoning. For all she knows their might be special agencies that deal with this sort of thing. (This is no more paranoid than anything else you might hear these days. In War-time, you can take it as read people are going to pay extra-careful attention to the world, whether they're counter-terrorism forces or just PR agents making sure they know exactly where the Man on the Street stands. Intelligence and market research—in War-time what's the difference?)

'Shit,' says Horror.

Inangela focuses on the road beyond the windscreen, and sees what's caused this outburst. There's no traffic up ahead, at least not going the same way as the van, which is something. There's a crossroads, though. Traffic lights on every side. The occasional smear of white, as other vehicles go from left to right across the junction.

The lights themselves are red. The first signs of real colour that they've seen for some time. The world is making it quite clear this is the place to stop.

So Inangela says, without even thinking about it: 'Keep going.'

'What, through the red—'

'They won't follow us.'

'I thought police could do that kind of—'

'*Go*,' shrieks Inangela, and suddenly the van's lurching to one side, and for a moment Inangela thinks that Horror's panicking after having someone shout in her ear and can't keep the vehicle under control. But the van's going faster than Inangela thinks. The truth is, they've already reached the lights, and it's much, much too late to do anything about it now. The sound of shrieking is the sound of tyres moving sideways across the road, but it's not altogether clear whether they're the tyres of the van or the tyres of something coming the other way. There are headlights everywhere. Inangela tilts to one side, and bangs the side of her head against the window on the passenger side. The glass is cold and sticky.

And now it's all over. Now there's nothing but a road, framed by white street-lights on either side, leading out towards the edge of town. There's no traffic ahead. You can still hear the yelling of horns, the sound of cars trying not to scar each other in the confusion, and the howling of a siren that gets further and further and further away

as its lights get smaller and smaller and smaller in the wing-mirror. Inangela looks at Horror, and Horror's eyes are fixed on the road, half-open as usual.

'Yeah,' notes Horror. 'You're right. They *haven't* followed us.'

That's it. They've crossed the line. They're committed. How much more committed can you possibly get?

1. Witching Hour

1.00 Wake the Dead

The girl used to have a sister. Two years younger, not identical but near enough.

Now she's walking the street where that sister was last seen alive, wearing her sister's clothes, her sister's make-up, her hair cut, bobbed and bound in her sister's style. You can see that she's trying to look younger than she is, that she's trying to look like a defenceless fourteen-year-old, forgetting the way her sister *really* was—brash, loud, confident, adolescent—and instead adopting all the signs that the media usually associate with someone who they know (with hindsight) to be marked out as a victim.

She sweeps along the road, here in the early morning hours, exactly two days after her sibling walked the same route. Big black coat trailing behind her, cameras from at least a dozen television stations tracking her every move. Wisely, they don't dwell on the broken fence where one of the recent rocket attacks turned two sizeable buildings into gravel. They concentrate on the girl, even as she concentrates on the road ahead and acts as if she's alone. Alone and scared, naturally. In the hope someone will see this and, for one reason or another, remember something.

The girl swerves around the corner, and her followers move with her, swinging in an arc so smooth that the years of experience in television look almost instinctual. The video cameras closest to her, discretely trying not to film each other. The press cameras just behind them, weaving through the spaces in the cortege to take flashbulb-shots whenever the opportunity seems to present itself. And after that come the people who don't technically need to be there, members of the girl's family who want to be share in the process, police liasons who want to make sure the family and the press don't mix, small and tightly-knit groups of locals who've turned up on the pretext that they *might* remember something if they can somehow be involved. And others, even further from the girl in the black coat. Over a hundred of them. Never touching each other, always knowing their place.

Some day, all funeral processions will look like this.

1.01 Council

She's just finished explaining herself to her Executive. She's just

finished telling them about the tapes. By now both Danzael and Nod have seated themselves, one at each end of the big semicircular table, flanking the assembly as if they were buffers between the Executive and the rest of humanity.

It's certainly worth pointing out that Danzael and Nod are the only two who break the normal Executive pattern of fashion sense. Danzael is all in black, and might qualify as smartly-dressed if he took off his big, dark, ungainly overcoat—the suggestion is that he's worn it during every excess of his life, and never washed it, picking up totemic stains of blood, liquor, expensive boullion and God knows what else. Mother Nod, ever the opposite, prefers white. All white. But she looks uncomfortable in the evening dress, as though elegance demands she show off her shoulders and she can't help feeling there's something morally questionable there.

Tiffany can never be sure which Executive member is officially the leader, since she doesn't know all of the nine by name and even keeping track of their genders can be problematic. She assumes, though, that right now it's the one dead in the centre of the table—the one to whom she feels she's reporting. As she finishes her testimony he takes another drink from one of the hotel staff, flavoured coffee rather than wine this time, for that "intimate" feel. The scent of sugar, orange and caffeine cuts into Tiffany's nostrils, and after an evening of burning fat and videotape it's actually a shock to smell something that sweet.

The current Chief Executive sticks the straw into the darkened snout of the mask, something which Tiffany doesn't think would be possible with a shop-bought counterfeit mask, and sips on the hot drink for a while before he questions her. His associates watch him expectantly, except Danzael, who never expects anything.

It goes like this. One, two, one two three four:

1.02 Minutes (1)

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: And… you're worried by this?

TIFFANY: It wasn't *me*.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Oh, Tiffany. *None* of them are you, you know that. The photograph in the morning paper, that isn't you either. They're all just iterations.

TIFFANY: They're supposed to all be the same!

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Well now. It wouldn't be very interesting for your fans, would it? If all the pictures were the same.

TIFFANY: That's not what I mean! You know what I mean.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Now, Tiffany… let's put this in perspective. At present, you take up very nearly a whole one-per-cent of the conceptual space allocated to popular entertainment. On this continent, at least. You're a big girl now. There are billions of you out there. Trillions, even, if you count every frame of video as a different iteration.

TIFFANY: They're not supposed to think for themselves! You said that one day one of them might be—

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Oh, I think it's much too early for that, don't you? All I'm saying is that… the media can be a bewildering place. Even for you. Sooner or later you're *bound* to see something that doesn't make sense. That doesn't match with the way you like to see yourself, if you want to put it like that. It doesn't mean one of your iterations has a mind of its own.

TIFFANY: But it *could* happen, right?

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Not yet, Tiffany. Not for a long, long time yet. I'm sure there's a simple explanation. Tell me, have you been, ahh… distracted, today?

TIFFANY: What?

NOD: [Mutters something under her mask.]

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: I'm sorry, Mother?

NOD: There was cocaine… in the room…

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Well, I should imagine so. Tiffany's a successful young woman. [This prompts some chuckling from the rest of the Executive.]

TIFFANY: I didn't imagine it.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: No, no. I'm not suggesting that at all. But you're… rather alert at the moment. Especially after the performance.

NOD: [Mumbles something again.]

TIFFANY: And you're sure it's not true? You're *sure*?

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: I'm quite sure. You seem very anxious, Tiffany. We wouldn't want you to be unhappy.

TIFFANY: But I need to know. I need to know I don't have a *doppelganger*.

[Some consternation from the rest of the Executive.]

1.03 "Doppelganger"

This isn't a word that comes naturally to Tiffany, which is why she pronounces it wrongly. The truth is she heard it "somewhere," the "somewhere" of magazines that have been thrown away and misremembered or television programmes that were only ever watched by accident. It's a word that's pulled back out of her psyche quite recently, because on some level she must know exactly how apt it is.

Or it could go deeper. Faction Paradox, as a legendary body, has nonce-words for everything. Perhaps for the Faction and the Faction-like, "doppelganger" suggests a very specific phenomenon. It's possible the Executive even used the word in one of the many documents which aren't supposed to interest the "talent" at all.

That would certainly explain the Chief Executive's rather guarded reaction, and the way he has to unexpectedly confer with his colleagues before he turns back to Tiffany.

1.04 Minutes (2)

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: What… do you mean by that, Tiffany?

TIFFANY: Are there… are there more of me? Are there more of me who can think?

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: They're all you, Tiffany. You know that.

TIFFANY: There could be others, though, y'know? Other iter… iterations. And they could all be making more iterations. Ones that aren't anything to do with me—

NOD: *All* your iterations have something to do with you. That's what we're trying to explain.

TIFFANY: But… [She runs out of words.]

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Ah. I think I see the problem. Tiffany… are you worried that you're not the important one any more?

[Some laughter from the rest of the Executive. Affectionate rather than mocking.]

TIFFANY: No… no, I'm not saying…

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: You're *always* the important one. You know that. Wherever you are in the world, and in whichever iteration. And we just want you to be happy.

[Murmurs of agreement from the others. Directed at Tiffany.]

TIFFANY: I just… want to know.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: It's quite understandable. You're in a rare position. You have the eyes of… well… 58% of the world on you. And

I'm quite sure there's no cause for alarm. A few frames on a single tape… it's hardly something to worry yourself about.

TIFFANY: You're sure?

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Oh, I'm sure.

[A pause here.]

TIFFANY: You are the only ones who know about this stuff, right?

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Naturally. We're the definite article. You know that.

TIFFANY: Yeah. Yeah, I know that.

1.05 Near Miss (1)

Valentine, on the road.

Nobody's going to stop an ambulance. More importantly, it's highly doubtful that anybody's going to question the disappearance of the girl in the mask. Her friends, assuming she has/ had any, will tell the authorities she was last seen heading for the square. The assumption *will* be she was caught in the attack, a victim of the impact rather than the shockwave. Valentine isn't sure yet what he's going to do with her body, although he's sure it will be a body soon, even if it isn't now. Every couple of minutes he finds himself thinking about ways of getting the corpse back to the family without alerting the hospital to a major breach in procedure, before he remembers there's a much simpler way of disposing of the evidence and he's heading right for it.

The thought really, really isn't good for his sense of well-being.

Valentine on the road, passing the point where he could truthfully claim to be en route to the hospital. He's been up since six o'clock in the morning and he's been on the job since six in the evening, so it's getting to the point where he can be hypnotised by just about anything. The ambulance headlights, low to the road, make the dotted white lines in the road flash in binary. On-off on-off on-off.

This auto-hypnotic spell is broken by the van which unexpectedly screeches out into the middle of the road ahead of him, arriving in the glare of the headlights from an angle so unlikely that you'd swear it'd invented a whole new dimension of its own. While his hands slip over the steering-wheel, Valentine tries his best to focus on the other vehicle but just catches the outline of something dark, bulky and fundamentally *contrary*.

Then it's gone. Valentine, still trying to assert his authority over the wheel, knows that he can't claim any credit for missing it—the van simply slid across the road and out of the range of the headlights,

obviously feeling comfortable with the two-foot gap that must have separated it from the weight of the ambulance.

Even so. It seems, once again, almost a case of providence (a word Valentine uses a lot, since he suspects that when he starts saying "destiny," he'll know he's become pathological). And suddenly his senses are on the alert again. He's also shockingly aware of what he's doing, as if his heart's still thumping out the message FOR CHRIST'S SAKE STOP.

The other thing he becomes aware of is the girl who lies dead or dying not three feet behind him. He resists the urge to look over his shoulder, knowing that if he does then he'll spend the rest of the night waiting for a single twitch of movement that's probably—almost *certainly*—never going to come.

He reaches for the thermos flask on the seat by his side. Coz's flask, and likely to contain Coz's pills, crushed up and added to the coffee as casually as anyone else would add sugar. Or maybe not. Either way, Valentine could do with the support.

1.06 45,001

There was another girl, once, who got caught on the edge of the War like this. Valentine might tell you the whole horror story, one day—the way they found her, the way she died and all the wounds she had. That's not important now. What matters is that once she'd been delivered to the hospital and formally announced DOA, Coz found Valentine out on the hospital forecourt. He was watching the little orange tail-lights of the vehicles as they pulled away and headed back into town, the brilliant white of the headlamps as new ambulances moved into the parking bays. It must have been clear, even to someone as big and as cow-skinned as Coz, that Valentine was having his first crewman-crisis.

'You be all right?' Coz asked, obviously trying to make himself sound as masculine as possible.

Coz was, of course, missing the point. He was assuming that Valentine—young, inexperienced, squeamish Valentine—was reacting to the death, or the blood, or just the shape of the holes in the dead girl's neck. Forgetting that Valentine had, thanks to the wonders of the modern media, witnessed nearly 45,000 deaths (faked or otherwise) and countless operations before even reaching his eighteenth birthday.

No. The girl's death was hardly the issue. The problem was this: of the 45,000 deaths that Valentine had seen second-hand, every single one of them had been supplied with a sense of meaning.

This casualty had no consequences. Image the effect of that on Valentine, with his symbols of protest and his subtly-pointed jewellery. But how do you express that to a fellow crewman who isn't, let's face it, the most sensitive human being in the world?

'Don't you think it's weird?' Valentine asked.

'What?' said Coz, typically.

'That nobody *cares*.'

Coz clearly didn't think it was weird.

'Can't make people care,' he said. 'S'human nature.'

And ohh, that was the wrong thing to say. It must seem odd to anyone that Valentine should have entered this profession, when he's hardly inclined towards the medical. The truth is, as with so much else in his life, he started along this path to prove a point. That human nature is flexible, at the very least. That *some* people are prepared to take jobs like this even though the pay's piss-poor, not out of a sense of self or out of desperation but because ultimately it has to be done. Yes: his occupation is the end result of a political argument that began when he was a spunky adolescent, and which shows no sign of ending now that he's older and a little more War-torn.

Can't make people care. How can he believe that's true, when you can make people do just about anything else? When ad-men condition whole populations as a matter of course, when the War-time powers can tell the world to accept ritual killing as warfare even if the War makes no sense, when everything in the culture screams that people can be twisted, turned and re-iterated into things which seem barely human at all?

Making people care, or at least notice that there's something to care about, is important. At least as important as the job he's paid to do. As actually saving anyone's life. He still believes in this philosophy, but he's troubled by the question of how it relates to the girl who's now being left to die in the back of the ambulance.

1.07 Hell

There are far, far too many rumours about the way the War actually works, or at least, how it works in relation to a town like *this* one. Obviously the younger members of the community-under-fire will occasionally claim to be working for, working with or selling narcotics on behalf of one of the great War-time powers. But it's like watching a five-year-old boy, who—not being aware that he's really so small, stupid and chubby-looking—tries to convince his friends that he's

been trained to fight by a master ninja.

One of the most popular stories involves the way the higher powers train and recruit their soldiers. Their ground-level troops, says the story, are recruited right here: from the streets of the town itself, and from a million other towns like it. They start out as perfectly normal people, but then they're subjected to a form of brainwashing like nothing else in the world. A quite specific form of Hell.

Each subject finds himself in a room full of television screens, and on those screens he's shown what he perceives to be his entire life, in every perfect detail (this process presumably doesn't occur in real-time, suggesting the drugs work on the victim's time-perception, although obviously those who tell the *elaborate* version of this story claim that time itself is somehow altered).

Consider that for a moment: every detail of a lifetime. And thanks to the drugs, whatever they might be, the subject is also pathologically *convinced* that these pictures are being broadcast to every other television screen in the whole wide world, that every human being in existence—friends, family, casual acquaintances, complete strangers—is now privy to every moment of his past, every sentence ever spoken, every mistake ever made, every foible, every failure, every embarrassment, every absurdity, every fear, every fetish and every second of horror. From first to last, and right up to the present. Some versions of the legend even add the audience supposedly has the option of a running "director's commentary," the subject's own internal voice, smeared all over the audio soundtrack so they're in absolutely no doubt what he's thinking.

Well, it's an effective way of destroying someone's identity. Perhaps the theory is that from this point on the subject will *beg* the Higher Powers to lead him, to instruct him, to take over his entire sense of being, as a way of absolving him of all responsibility for everything and anything he might do, say or think in the future.

There's no point asking where the source material comes from for these rumours. Come to think of it, nobody's even explained why the people who run the War would *need* soldiers. It says a lot about towns like this, though, doesn't it? Around here the worst thing that can happen, the most personality-destroying experience imaginable, is for your whole life to be sacrificed to the culture-in-general.

There are, of course, many people who'd want their lives to be that visible. But even *they'd* want a warning first. Who wants to be on television without a dress rehearsal? Who wants to be offered up in front of that many people before they've figured out what they want to say?

1.08 Edge of Town

All the token signs of civilisation are here, the paving-stones and the speed cameras, but suddenly you notice that if you were to stray off the road then there'd be nothing but dark beyond it. There are open spaces that might have been parks or fields, in another life, but here and now they're the wastelands. Shine your headlights through the long grass and the nettle-walls, and all you'll see are the bodies of burned-out cars or patches of scorched earth: a lost civilisation of abandoned machinery and stolen-property bonfires.

It's only now, looking out of the passenger window, that Inangela realises she's hit a snag. The ritual, as she perceives it, is basically graffiti on a monumental scale. She intends to leave her mark, a very *specific* mark, at precisely-selected points around the town perimeter. She plans to spell out a form of message on the ground, to embrace the whole of the town in one gigantic statement. Animal shapes? Hah! This is more like urban tagging. Nobody will see this message, not even from the air, but it's not the view from above that's important.

But… for some reason, she was expecting the edge of town to have *walls*. She's already bought five cans of spray-paint, four of which are rattling around under the passenger seat and the fifth of which is now nesting in the pocket of her coat, along with a video cassette and the foil lid from a black-cherry yoghurt. She was imagining herself spraying her symbol on the wall closest to the very south-eastern edge of the town, and it's only just struck her that there may not be a wall for miles.

They're getting close to the place now. She knows this without checking the A—Z. Horror must be able to feel it too, because the van's slowing down. Cruising, not speeding, as relaxed as Horror herself. Just for the smallest possible time, the headlights glance off four little circles of light in the dark and shapeless and overgrown patches by the side of the road. There's the impression of two shapes, two rare silhouettes of *something* in the blackness and the high grass. In that one tiny moment the shapes seem unnaturally huge, given hunched, bloated, muscular shadows by the headlights. Their eyes are orange, the same colour as the copper moon.

'Dogs,' says Horror, without any apparent enthusiasm.

She's right. Only dogs live out here. Inangela looks in the rear-view mirror, just in time to catch the four small, round bullet-points of copper as the tail-lights hit their eyes. The dogs are watching the van pass them by. As if it caught them in the middle of a secret, grunted conversation, and they know they can't go on until they're alone.

‘We’re nearly there,’ says Inangela, somewhat unnecessarily.

1.09 Ms. Korta and the Devils

There’s another fundamental difference between Inangela and Tiffany, which is probably worth mentioning at this point, given that the subjects of angels and daemons has already been raised. It’s this:

Inangela has *one* daemon. She has one foil, in the shape of Horror. It’s Horror who gives voice to Inangela’s doubts, not that she tries particularly hard to argue. It’s like listening to Faust debating with Mr. M, or like listening to the brain arguing with the stomach, although you could argue about which is which. One driver, one passenger.

And yet when Tiffany’s seen in the company of her Executive, she’s generally seen with at least two of its members. There’s one on each side of her now, as she moves along the corridor back to the hotel lift, eyes fixed on the carpet in “no photographs” mode even though there’s nobody looking at her for once. One male, one female, flanking her like hunting-animals stripped down to the bone. They lead her in the same general direction, but they frequently argue with each other, each whispering in a different ear. Mother Nod appears to have a genuine concern for the culture on which Tiffany has such an impact, frequently worrying about the poor, vulnerable psyches of those who might watch her over the entertainment news media. Father Danzael appears to have a more reckless approach. His attitude, when faced with any question of culture or media, is very much one of ‘fuck ‘em, they know what they’re getting into.’

Really, you could say Inangela’s the old-fashioned one here. People have always heard voices. There have always been Fausts and Joan of Arcs, all of them channelling one daemon at a time. Everybody knows the other-voice is there, whether their daemon’s a friend, a totem animal, a hallucination or a combination of the above. The human psyche’s been split in half for most of its existence. Ah, but as for Tiffany…

…Tiffany’s a true product of the twentieth century, that period when it became clear that two voices weren’t enough. The period when Freud split the mind into thirds instead of halves, the id, the ego and the superego, A.K.A. the beast, the rational self and the angel. The period when textbook image of the man with a monster on his shoulder was replaced by the cartoon image of the man with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, both of them wearing his own face, one talking like a Castrato choirboy (non-sexual, non-threatening) and the other talking like a bookie from the Bronx.

Let's hear it for the cartoons, they've re-shaped our consciences so well.

Everything Inangela does is instinctual. She instinctively found her old-fashioned daemon. But the Executive is schooled in Freud, Jung and a dozen other barber-surgeons of the last century. They know Tiffany needs a monster on either side of her. Duality's so passé. Trinity's been the in thing for a long, long time now.

1.10 Possible Conversation (Once Tiffany Has Left)

[Initially, an awkward silence all round the table.]

AN EXECUTIVE: You don't think…?

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Hmm?

ANOTHER EXECUTIVE: Well. Well. You don't think it's… it's in any way possible…

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: That?

AN EXECUTIVE: That she really *does* have a doppelganger.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Mmmm. You are aware, of course… that this is the real world.

ANOTHER EXECUTIVE: But it's… well. It's what we said would happen. Eventually.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: I think, Leslie, that you're rather confusing the philosophy of the thing with the practicalities.

1.11 The Wasteland

The House of Marrero is parked dead in the middle of the road, safe in the knowledge that nobody's going to want to get past, but Horror's left the engine running just in case the police turn up. Meanwhile, Inangela stands in the full glow of its headlights, with her back turned to the bonnet and her face turned to the wind—the only thing that seems determined to get into town at all.

She's standing on the spot which, by her reckoning, marks the *exact* edge of the settlement. To the yard. To the foot. If she took one more step then she'd leave, but she's fairly sure it isn't an option. Now she's committed, the town won't let her get away until she's completed the circuit.

Which obviously now makes her tempted to take that step, just to see whether it's possible or not.

She decides on a count of three. Inangela does everything important on a count of three. Lots of people do.

One.

Two.

'Hey,' says Horror.

Inangela scowls. She's not someone who likes being disturbed in mid-process. She looks back, towards Horror, who's leaning against the side of the van with her rump resting against the handle.

Turning around means turning towards the headlights, so Inangela has to narrow her eyes and wrinkle her nose, and in the glare she doesn't immediately notice what's got Horror's attention. When she *does* see the shapes gathering around the House of Marrero, that's all they really are: just shapes, just big, bulky chunks of the dark that have broken away and moved into positions of their own accord.

This scene isn't best-seen from Inangela's perspective. So:

1.12 Heightened POV

(We're used to these changes of perspective. Cinema has trained us well. There was a time when we could only see things from our point of view, however quickly the actors moved across the stage, but we've all grown up used to the idea that there's a Camera One and a Camera Two and a Camera Three. You think it's a coincidence that relativity and the film camera grew up together?)

Picture the scene from a high angle. The picture's in black and white, and the edges are blurred as you'd find in amateur video footage, which is how we know it's real. Only Inangela, standing in the beam of the headlights, is so bright that every feature becomes well-defined. She becomes a perfect monochrome image, her skin bleached a brilliant white and her clothes made out in perfect black.

Beyond the beam, things are grey and troubling. The undergrowth on either side of the road becomes a static fuzz, as does Horror, although even through this low-quality lens we can tell that her muscles are tensing underneath her chubby arms. She's tensing because of the other things we can see on the picture. When they're still they're invisible, as blurred as the background, but when they move they grow brief, unexpected shadows. All of them staying just outside the glare of the headlights, or sticking to the fuzz at the sides of the road. Almost forming a semicircle around the van, but they don't seem intelligent enough to understand a formation so mathematically-precise even if they look as if they've specifically been

directed here.

When they move, they seem huge. It's not their musculature that does it, although these urban animals have forgotten how to be domesticated, so they mostly *are* muscle. It's the wish to be feral again that makes them larger than life. These dogs have no compunction, no compunction about anything. The camera picks up on this and turns them into monsters.

'They're *looking* at us,' says Horror

Inangela raises her arms, a little, but it's not a gesture the dogs can understand.

'It's okay,' she says. 'Its okay. They're just… curious.'

'They're looking at us,' says Horror.

Inangela shakes her head, but slowly, so as not to worry the animals. Worry them! Ha. 'It's okay. Let's just… do what we have to do, and… then get back in the van. All right?'

'Great. So do it. Spray your message. Whatever you like.'

It takes Inangela a moment or two to move, to stop squinting into the dark on the off-chance that the animals might be about to pounce. When she does, she seems… a little bewildered. She's looking for something.

'Now…?' prompts Horror.

'Where do I make the mark?' asks Inangela. Obviously, she's asking herself. She wouldn't trust Horror to answer a question that important.

'You don't *know*?' says Horror.

One of the dogs, the closest to the van on the opposite side to Horror, takes a single, silent step forward. The others all follow, one after another, a chain reaction of slight and subtle movement across the picture.

But Inangela's still looking around. Even down. Wondering if she should just spray her all-important symbol on the road itself, although you can tell she hates that idea. You can tell she was expecting something else, something a lot more…

—oh. And now she's looking at *us*.

Directly at us.

'Speed camera,' she says, as if it's a revelation.

Ah! So *that*'s the lens through which we're seeing this scene. Not that any of this is being filmed, of course, but it's good to know whose eyes you're using.

And Inangela's still staring at us, still staring at the camera. She

gestures towards Horror, but cautiously, making sure her hands in no way look like cats or rabbits. Horror clearly doesn't know what the gesture's supposed to mean.

'Get back in the van,' says Inangela. 'I know what to do.'

1.13 The Future

There's a hierarchy of meaning, and it's based on difference: it's based on how different an event is to all the events before it. The same way you never notice an object in your own home until something or someone makes it move. The night's War casualties won't be mentioned in tomorrow's newspapers. The murder of the fourteen-year-old, heavily reported in the local media over the last few days, is more important but has competition. The performance by Tiffany Korta is, by the town's standards, so different to what's gone before that it's like a fast-moving object in front of the lens. Careful: our vision is based on movement. We're primed this way. We can only notice the extraordinary. It's how we evolved.

Ultimately, it's safe to make a prediction. Neither of these stories will appear on the front page of tomorrow's papers, although both will intersect with the story that *is*. With all these rituals taking place at once, inside such a small space (this town) and inside one single system of thought (also this town), something's bound to turn up. The question is, which of our many suspects will be responsible for bringing on the crisis?

1.14 Elsewhere

It's not the best part of town. To be honest it's probably within a shot of being the worst part of town, but since this is a *town* and not a city there are, at least, precisely-defined limits to how bad things can get. There are low-rent housing blocks on either side, a four-way crossroads up ahead with more low-rent housing blocks spreading out (no… *urban-sprawling* out, that's what housing blocks do) in all directions. Street-lamps standing in neat rows, *like soldiers*. Everyone makes that comparison, when they see things lined up in rows: like soldiers. Here it's true, since some of them have been wounded in action.

There's nobody on the street when the ambulance pulls up on the kerb. Once the engine shuts down there's no sound but the buzz of background traffic, a long, long way away.

The side-street, which has been identified by Valentine as *the* side-

street, runs between one of the housing blocks and a row of garages with big metal shutters. The ambulance is parked on the corner, not on the side-street itself and not really on the main street either, so that anyone locals looking out of their windows can assume the vehicle's there to deal with somebody *else's* domestic violence case.

Valentine finds his attention drawn by the graffiti that's been spread across the garage doors on the other side of the road. Much like the graffiti in the alley where Coz let the poisons out of his body, much like the graffiti you see everywhere now. The children who put them there (Valentine, being twenty-two, thinks of a "child" as anyone more than five years younger than himself) probably think the big-eyed skull-shapes are menacing. "Menace" is not what he feels, however. What he feels is the need to glance over his shoulder, at the stretcher in the back of the ambulance and its current occupant, before he gets out of the door on the driver's side.

1.15 The Symbol on the Wasteland

The speed camera works in much the same way as any other. It contains a mechanism designed to latch on to vehicles moving above a certain speed, and when triggered it takes a photograph very, very quickly. The photograph is then transmitted, via routes which remain obscure if not exactly mystical, to the local authorities.

The image which has just been taken by the token speed camera on the south-eastern edge of town is unconventional, however. The vehicle it depicts is a black van, heading back into town at speed, although the van's very nearly incidental. It may have triggered the camera, but it's not the focus of the image. The focus is the symbol that's been daubed across the lens. In fact the symbol's drawn in spray-paint, but the lens isn't a big one, so it looks as though someone's dipped their finger into the paint and smudged it across the eye of the camera.

The symbol is much like a figure-eight, but turned onto its side. There's what looks like a "bow" in the centre of the loop, giving the suggestion of a serpent-like head, and the uncomfortable implication that one end of the symbol is eating the other. In addition the curves of the shape have been made much too angular, so it's halfway between a figure-eight and a pair of opposing triangles. Each of the two spaces between the serpent's coils has been filled with a much smaller symbol, but the paint is thick and runny and it's not quite clear what these other shapes are supposed to be.

Some automatic function of the town is going to find this image, soon, and feed it back to some unseen control-room at the heart of the

community. The symbol's going to travel all the way through the town's invisible nervous system, all the way from the outskirts to the core. One symbol, printed onto the town's subconscious.

It won't be the last.

The dogs are watching the van as it speeds away. They, too, could be storing its image. Though God knows who's ever going to see it, or who the dogs report to when nobody else is around.

1.16 The Meaning of Life

'Happy now?' says Horror.

'That's just the start,' Inangela tells her. 'Now we see Miss Ruth.'

It's got to be said, though: Inangela *does* seem happier. Now the first part of the ritual's in place, and the first of the symbols has been pumped into the town's heart. Now she's been involved in the breaking of at least two minor laws in the process.

And deep down, under the earth or on the very bottom of her subconscious or quite possibly both, something's moving. It's held in place, for now, but all it needs is to be acknowledged and it can tear its way up out of the ground and change the world forever. And as Inangela's symbol continues to burn itself into the film of the speed camera, it feels its tethers start to break and realises that it's at least capable of flexing the occasional muscle.

1.17 Meaning, the Movie

'Yeah, but listen,' Coz said to Valentine, twenty-eight hours ago. 'If someone invented a time machine, yeah… they'd come back and tell us about it, that's what I'm saying.'

Coz's thoughts on time-travel were never going to be very profound. He's had less reason to think about these things than Valentine.

'That's the thing, though,' said Valentine. 'What I mean is… if there was a Ship that could move through time, yeah? Maybe you couldn't… actually… build it.'

'Wouldn't work,' agreed one of the other drivers, completely missing the point.

(This conversation, by the way, took place in the crew rec room at the hospital. It's not a nice room—it's probably meant to guarantee the ambulance teams spend as little time hanging around there as possible. It's grey, clammy and there's a machine that makes coffee which isn't hot enough.)

Valentine shook his head. ‘No, I didn’t mean that. I mean… maybe you couldn’t build one without… using it to build one.’

‘Yeah,’ agreed the other driver, *still* missing the point. ‘So it wouldn’t work.’

‘I’m saying, it might be like a… structure,’ Valentine went on, determined to get this point across. He didn’t explicitly mention that he might be talking about Ships of War here. He didn’t want the other crews thinking he was *wholly* insane, and besides, it was too close to home at this particular point. ‘Like a pattern. In time. Yeah?’

‘It’d be great, having a time machine,’ said yet another crewman, tilting the coffee machine at precisely the right angle to get the maximum sugar out of it. ‘You could go back and… like… tell the captain of the *Titanic* about the iceberg.’

‘And prevent a major tragedy,’ said Valentine, although he never got to deliver the punchline.

‘It’d be like that advert,’ the driver-who-always-misses-the-point cut in. ‘You know, for the life insurance? Where the guy turns back time and asks the girl to marry him…?’

‘Watch it,’ said Coz. ‘Val hates adverts.’

Valentine tried to look non-committal, even as he became the centre of attention.

‘I like those instant coffee ones,’ said the man by the drinks machine, missing the irony completely.

‘What d’you mean, “hate” them?’ said the other man.

‘I just think it’s dangerous, that’s all,’ Valentine tried to explain, although he suspected he wasn’t going to make much of an impression. ‘You know there are kids now who grow up copying the TV ads? That’s just, you know… how they see themselves. They don’t want to be like *people*, they just want to be like the characters in the ad breaks. That’s how they want to look and dress and… everything.’

He didn’t add “and this is why nobody notices the War,” because you never, *ever* start an argument about politics in the rec room. But Coz snirked anyway, his own exclusive way of laughing.

‘What?’ said Valentine, defensively.

‘ “Kids”,’ said Coz. ‘And you’re such an old man.’

1.18 War-Time

It’s often said that the Ships—meaning, the vessels used by those who run the War which must, surely, deliver the rockets—have an

unusual relationship with time.

Don't take this too literally. It's also said that cats have nine lives, that the best prostitutes have hearts of gold and that the night has a thousand eyes. In any era of conflict, the people are likely to feel that time's been distorted. Wars have a way of making technology move so fast that the future has a hard time keeping up with the present, or dragging things back to the Good Old Days of military warlords and feuding bloodlines. This War? This War is fought with weapons that are never seen, at least until they detonate, weapons delivered by invisible vessels in patterns that make no logical sense. No logical sense in *three* dimensions, at least.

The "time-travel" idea began to emerge in the War's very early days. People were more likely to take notice of the attacks then, and more likely to ask what the War-time powers were actually trying to hit. Obviously their technical ability was beyond compare, so the idea that they were hitting targets by mistake was plainly unthinkable. And yet there seemed no sense in bombing industrial estates with no military function, or the low-rent housing complexes on the west side of town, or (as happened once or twice) patches of ground where no people or buildings were present at all. What was the pattern here? What could the purpose have been?

It probably started as a joke. Someone, maybe in one of the less brutal newspapers, perhaps suggested the higher powers were so advanced, they knew what the valid targets were going to be before they became valid targets (there's no military facilities there now, but just you wait, they could have the most appalling weapons imaginable before long). There's a subtle line between a "joke" and a "metaphor," though, and the whole time-travel theme crossed it some months ago.

As the idea rolls on, sometimes you get the feeling that it's now coming close to the line between "metaphor" and "fact." Time-active Ships of War would explain so, so much. Starting with the fact that nobody, nobody *reliable*, has ever seen one.

1.19 Why?

All the television sets are off now. Still dripping with sweat and fake tan, Tiffany is sitting on the floor of her room with her shoes off and her back to the wall, next to a power-point that's bursting with enough adapter-plugs to support forty-four pieces of hardware. The hotel-boy who led her up to the room is crouching on the end of the bed opposite her, but with his head down low and his hands folded in front of him, giving the impression he's scared he'll be beheaded if the Princess realises his eye-line is higher than hers. He's clearly honoured

to be left alone with her. He smiles at her whenever he's supposed to look sympathetic, and tries to be witty in her presence. She thinks she likes him.

'But… they're not *really* you,' he says, still keeping his eyes on the carpet. 'They're just pictures.'

Tiffany snorts. Really snorts. Foil is involved.

'Okay,' she says, trying her best to sound as convincing as the Chief Executive. 'Suppose someone made a model of you. I mean, like a really good model. Like a *perfect* model.'

'Um,' says the boy.

'I mean, perfect perfect,' Tiffany goes on. 'Every little piece in the right place. On the inside as well as the outside. Every little… what d'you call those things? Little things.'

'Cells?'

'No. Smaller than that.' She tries to demonstrate "small," with the help of two fingers and a single flake of cocaine.

'Atoms…?' tries the boy. Who's educated, of course.

'Yeah. So it's a perfect model, right? All the atoms in all the right places. And things that are smaller than atoms. All. In the right places. Even the brain.'

'Can they, uhh, make models like that?' the boy asks. As if celebrities have special knowledge of such futuristic technology.

'No. Wait.' Tiffany thinks for a second. 'Don't know. Don't think so. Listen… just say they made a model of you. Like that. What'd it be like?'

He's not sure what she's fishing for here. 'Well… it'd be like… me.'

'Wrong!' says Tiffany, making it chime like a bell, the same as the really good high note at the end of "Live 4U." 'It wouldn't be like you. It'd be you. It'd have, like, all the same thoughts in its head. His head. Whatever. Y'know… all the things you remember, he'd remember. All the things you like, he'd like too. Yeah?'

She's secretly thinking, "He'd like the same kind of sex," because she's hit *that* point in the night, even though she knows she's not going to break protocol. She remembers the statistic about blah-blah-per-cent of men having certain reactions to certain parts of her performance, and without even thinking about it lifts her arm over her head, putting her hand at the nape of her neck as if she's fixing her hair. But the boy just screws up his eyebrows, and doesn't even look up from the floor.

'No, wait,' he says, which is the first time he's risked disagreeing

with her. ‘It wouldn’t be me, because… it’d be made out of different bits. Different atoms. Just in the same, um… shape.’

‘Wrong,’ Tiffany says, but she’s too tired to chime again. ‘That’s wrong. Because…’

1.20 Because

…because *nobody’s* ever made up of the same bits they think they’re made up of. We’ve all been here before, but it’s worth remembering. They say that it in the course of seven years, every cell of flesh and blood and gristle in your body gets replaced: one cell dies out, ready for a new cell to slip into exactly the same position. Seven years. Seven years ago we were completely different people, and seven years from now we’ll be bad copies of the people we are today. Already, most of our memories are fake. Nth-generation reproductions, getting fuzzier every time the information’s passed from connection to connection. Mistakes get made, other factors intervene, and the copies lose more and more definition. Not just memories but bodies, too.

None of us is the original article. As a great man in a pulp SF novel once said (to an artificial human being, not that such a thing might be possible here in the *real* world): The continuity is all that matters. The information. Where the atoms are in relation to each other, not where they came from. What we are is in the context, not in the material itself. An exact copy always is the original, so it’s lucky there are no exact copies of anything in the world or we’d all be terribly, terribly insecure.

The conclusion? The conclusion that even Tiffany has reached, and let’s be horribly brutal, she’s not the smartest one around here. The conclusion is that for most of its long and awkward existence, the human species has been utterly unable to understand what it is, unable to realise that not a single one of its members has ever, ever, ever been a complete and discreet entity. Only now is it possible. Only now, in the age of videotape, is there a way of understanding—of seeing the way the self is copied, and copied, and copied, and sometimes erased and sometimes overwritten. Almost as if the VCR machine were invented purely as a model, a way of teaching children about life in the same way that pets teach them about death. Even if there’s an obvious side-effect, namely that they’re also starting to think they might be infinitely reproduceable. (That’s nothing. Soon the world will be able to clone animals at will, and then pets will end up teaching children about immortality.)

Although Tiffany would be less poetic. This isn’t the kind of thing she’d ask the Executive to write a song about.

1.21 Room for One More

There's a story which, like so much else in a War-time world, is so familiar that it's everywhere without ever having had an apparent point of origin. Let's pretend it came ready-installed with the universe.

It involves a certain carriage that arrives in a certain spot at a certain time, but *always at night*. Everything in the story is black. The night's black, the carriage is black, the driver—whose face is rarely seen, verging on skeletal if glimpsed—is dressed in black. The horses are black, in versions of the story which involve horses. The driver will be waiting for somebody, the implication being that he could be waiting for *anybody*, e.g. the audience. The word "death" usually isn't used in the context of the carriage, partly because the story would become absurd if the point were made so overtly.

Which brings us to Valentine, standing in the one deliberately darkened patch of the side-street, underneath the only streetlamp that's not surrounded by a puddle of orange light. This doesn't make him feel invisible. It puts him at the very centre of attention, which makes him understandably uneasy. He's the only human being on the street, but that just makes him feel like a big bright target in the dark.

He becomes all too aware of his ambulance crew uniform. In theory it gives him protection, since a medical worker can give just about *any* reason for being here to a passing police patrol (right now Valentine's thinking of a shell-shocked 'this girl died in the ambulance and I'm just… you know… trying to get my nerves together'), but it also marks him out as vulnerable.

Valentine was expecting to make the rendezvous at 1:15. As it turns out, it takes the car another six minutes to make its presence felt. The first time he sees the vehicle it drives on past, circling the block before it comes for him, but he knows that it's here for him and nobody else.

Need it even be explained that the car is black? Limosines have something which horses lack. Their blackness *shines*. They're the perfect evolutionary form of the story of the black coach, smoothed-out and streamlined over the generations until there doesn't even have to be a driver visible behind the tinted windscreen, until the bloody-eyed horses of the Pit become the glaring headlights, until the vehicle's ability to appear out of the night without warning becomes the hiss of a finely-tuned engine, ideal camouflage against the background noise of any town or city.

Valentine doesn't know as much about cars as either Inangela (who's learned a lot from watching Horror try not to hit them) or Tiffany (who knows the most *expensive* breeds from their usefulness in

video). All he knows is that when you absolutely *have* to be back at the casualty department in a hurry—not like tonight—some vehicles get in your way more effectively than others. So he can't be absolutely sure that the car is a Limosine, as such. He just knows it's his turn for a ride.

1.22 What?

'That's… interesting,' the boy tells Tiffany. He's not humouring her. He honestly thinks it's interesting, which is to say, he thinks it's interesting given it's come from *her*. Pop stars are supposed to have opinions about other pop stars (preferably favourable) and about world politics, as long as they don't specifically favour any one political faction. Standard celebrity protocol when it comes to discussing the War is "show compassion, but on no account suggest it should be stopped." They're not supposed to talk about cellular death and replacement. Soon he's going to ask her who told her all this, she's sure of it. 'That's really interesting. But…'

He glances at the huge black plastic mass of televisions and video recorders at the end of the bed. Tiffany finds herself glancing with him.

'Oh,' she says. 'Oh. Right. Well… that's me, right? I'm like that. I'm kind of everywhere.' She prepares another line of the cocaine as she says it, just to make sure she'll be in even more places soon.

The boy is non-plussed. 'You're…?'

'I'm *everywhere*!' Tiffany exclaims. 'I'm on TV and I'm on video and I'm on fan-sites and… I'm just *everywhere*.'

'But… that's not really you, is it?' the boy tries, bringing things full-circle.

'Yeah. It is. That's the point, right? 'Cause it doesn't matter where any of our bits are.' She shifts her leg as she says *bits*, maybe some kind of involuntary sex-reaction, and notices the way the boy tracks the movement of her calves. 'It doesn't matter,' she goes on. 'The only thing that matters is the… thing. The… the where we are. The what we are. The thing that tells everything where to go.'

'Um…' the boy begins, but obviously he's not going to have anything to offer.

What word is Tiffany looking for? Actually there probably isn't a word for what she means, she's just imagining it being on the tip of her tongue because of what's on the lining of her nose. "Context" might fit the context.

‘Whatever,’ Tiffany concludes. ‘That’s what’s important, not the flesh and skin and stuff. It’s the, uh… it’s the *information*. And the information’s all over the world. Right? Look, if you want to know how big my hips are, you don’t have to be here with me and measure, y’know? You can just look at those tapes. You can see.’

‘But that information isn’t very, err… detailed,’ the boy points out, clearly not trying to think about the width of her hips. ‘And you sort of *are*. Detailed. Aren’t you?’

Tiffany shrugs. ‘Don’t know,’ she says.

1.23 The Lesson

In fact, Tiffany’s Executive has given her the answer to this question —its own answer to this question—but Tiffany’s forgotten it. Their answer is this:

There are billions upon billions of pieces of information in one human face. Proportions, distances, pigmentations, exact combinations of cells and patterns and possibilities. One man, looking at an image of that face, will only be able to take in a few thousand of those details at a time. But that observer will make judgements. Make connections. Compare that face to all the other faces he’s ever known. Store it in his memory, among all the other memories, adding new layers of meaning to what that face is and what it represents. By the time the process is complete, his “version” of that face is worth several million pieces of information, not just several thousand.

Now imagine that a billion different people see that image of the face.

Now imagine that there are a billion different images.

The lesson is this, Ms. Korta. However much your face is worth, whatever value it has in terms of information… it’s just the tiniest fraction of your uber-face, the great mass of data that’s made up of all your faces and the way all the people see them.

And suppose they knew what you were like on the inside. Would you have an uber-brain, as well?

Who are you?

1.24 Swallowed

Valentine is fairly sure the door of the great black car isn’t opened by hand. There’s a muffled electrical *chlick*, the door springing open by, ohh, not more than an inch. It’s for Valentine to take the last step towards the edge of the pavement, and to do the degrading, menial work of pulling the handle.

He's going, he's going, say the goblin-people behind the curtains of the houses.

The interior of the vehicle doesn't, can't, exist in the same universe as the street outside. That wouldn't make sense. Opening the door releases more things into the world than Pandora's Box—the smell of something more reptilian than leather, the beat of a music system so sharply-honed that it delivers every note with a precision no human musician could ever match. The pulse of the bass dictates the heartbeat of anyone who hears it. Every vehicle is a little world unto itself, but most of them at least try to stay in *some* contact with the world they're passing through.

He's taking the ride, he can hear the goblin-people say.

Standing there on the kerb, hunched over and squinting as the world inside the car makes itself known to him, Valentine can't help but feel faintly ridiculous. But it's his place to feel ridiculous. It's hard to get into worlds like this unless you go crawling on your hands and knees.

Too late, say the goblin-people. *Too late.*

Twenty seconds on, and the vehicle drifts away from the kerb with its new passenger hidden behind its coffee-black windows, the light and the smell and the sound having been sucked back into its dark, shiny body.

1.25 Meeting Horror

There's a saying that you can't go home again. Which is ironic if you live in a town like this one, doubly ironic if all towns are one town (and Tiffany isn't the *only* one who thinks of every burger restaurant and coffee-shop being the same place), but it makes more sense if "home" is what you used to do instead of where you originally came from.

There was a night, not so long ago, when Inangela went back to one of the neighbourhoods near where she was raised and—guess what—torched one of the Neighbourhood Watch signs there. Except that Watch signs have gone hi-tech since she was young, so her lighter only scorched the edges, but the intent was there. Her version of walking under a ladder, just to spite the superstition.

Ten minutes later, she was in the back of a police car. See? Can't go home again, can't perform the rituals you used to perform when you were a child or a so-troubled adolescent. That's initiation for you. Kids can burn the signs at will and remain invisible (in fact, becoming invisible may well be part of the point of the ceremony), but nobody over seventeen shall attempt the same and go unpunished.

That was the night she first met Horror, because Horror was already in the holding cell at the police station. Sitting with her back to the wall in the strip-lighting of a grubby little white room, staring at the panelling and apparently trying to figure out which square to push to unlock the secret exit. Inangela's first thought was, naturally, *drug arrest.* (This has never been confirmed, incidentally.)

Inangela paced the cell for, ohhhhhhhh, ten minutes or so before she managed to find an opening conversational gambit. In the end, the right thing to say turned out to be the simplest thing imaginable. She began with the traditional gesture of facing her cell-mate, raising her hands slightly, then letting them slap against the sides of her leather coat. Then just said:

'I'm Inangela, by the way.'

To which Horror said: 'I'm Horror.'

1.26 Coincidence

Horror! Can you imagine the terrible effect that had on Inangela's psyche? She'd already been punished once for performing a badly-judged, no-longer-fashionable ritual, punished like the Sorcerer's Apprentice and all those brooms. The whole object of the exercise had been to dispel all thoughts of the Great Urban Horror. And now this! A girl, an individual, a *thing,* claiming to be Horror itself! Could it be true? Could this be the town, the evil essence of *every* town, given human form? Or perhaps some dreadful messiah, the flesh-and-blood part of some Horror-related trinity, involving the town, the War and the girl with the facial piercings?

But this turned out not to be the case, and Inangela and Horror just ended up talking about boots for half an hour until the police let one of them go. The other one waited for her new friend outside the station, displaying great compassion and loyalty in the process, although these days each of them has a different memory of who got released first and who waited.

Even so. When Inangela thinks of Horror, her first instinct is *still* to think of a force-of-nature as much as a partner-in-crime. Something, someone, who arrived at the end of an otherwise wholly unsuccessful piece of ritual.

1.27 The Faction Are

'So you're just doing this 'cos you want to meet Faction Paradox,' says Horror.

‘No,’ Inangela tells her, and most emphatically, too. ‘The ritual’s its own reward.’

‘You’re just hoping Faction Paradox turn up at the end and give you another reward.’

‘Shut up.’

‘They should just have a website. That way anyone can get in touch with them.’

‘*It*,’ Inangela corrects her. ‘Faction Paradox is an it. Not a they. And it can’t have a website. It can’t have any existence in the world as we know it. Except by manifesting itself through, through, proper acts of ritual. So there.’

‘Everybody else has got a website.’

‘No website.’

‘And it can’t give people instructions through the TV or anything?’

‘No. Maybe. I mean, no. No contact with anyone. Except through ritual.’

‘No hanging around in masks?’

‘No! The masks are just a… focus. For the rest of us. They don’t wear masks.’

‘I thought you said it wasn’t a “they”?’

‘Shut up.’

‘And if it can’t contact anyone, then how come you’ve ever heard about it?’

‘Shut up.’

1.28 (A) The Place

This place, this shrine, is lit by candlelight. Candles make you think of church or power-cuts, depending on the generation you belong to, and these aren’t *those* kind of candles or *those* kind of candles. They’re scented, but the scent’s a bitter one, a kind of acid in the smoke. If you looked hard enough, you’d find the bones and bodies of lizards crushed into the wax, filling the air with sour, hallucinogenic poisons as they burn.

By contrast, the sound is trapped here inside the shrine. The constant *da-thumm da-thumm da-thumm* has no way of escaping from this place. It’s like being inside a coffin, like not being able to dig your way out of the ground. The bassline is the earth itself. A kind of gravity.

Valentine has been unable to breathe properly ever since he got into the back of the car. It could be the poisoned air or the way the *da-thumm da-thumm da-thumm* from the sound system presses him down into a seat that feels like rhino skin, but it could be just plain old banal fear. The black partition between the monstrous rear space of the vehicle and the front seats means that he can't even see what the driver's doing. If a car like this, a Black Carriage built for excess, *has* a driver.

There are two of the beast-carcass seats here, facing each other across the shrine. Valentine has his back to the driver's section, as befits a guest to this House. The owner, and lord of this territory, is seated opposite—his body reclining into the corner of the rear seat, with his arms and legs stretching so far and wide that you'd think the car's skeleton would collapse without him.

The man, or shall we say the *Man*, doesn't seem bothered by the toughness of the leather or by the tight, visceral pounding of the sound system. Of course not. He's right at home here.

1.29 (B) The Man

This Man is a Black Man. This in itself doesn't surprise Valentine, who tells himself that only a Black Man would fit a Black Carriage, although obviously the truth is that—post-Hollywood—he automatically expects most dealers in illicit materials to be non-Caucasian. It's important to be sure of what we mean here, though. Only an idiot uses the word "Black" as if it's a race rather than a political statement, and under normal circumstances the capital "B" would be unforgivable. There's three-hundred years of genetic and social evolution separating the average African-American and the average Jamaican, but wherever the Man in the car comes from, there's *at least* that big a gap between him and anything Hollywood might recognise as an ethnic minority.

His skin tone is a literal, almost-unbroken black. He is, as Valentine is beginning to suspect, West African in origin—this doesn't explain the blackness, since West Africans are *dark* but nothing like this. Something else is in the Man's blood. Possibly it's aristocracy, or a kind of fallen aristocracy. The bastard offspring of a rare and delicate bloodline, raised in the crucible of post-tribal Sierra Leone and thrown out into the modern world carrying genes that mark him out as *changed* even among his own people. Valentine wonders, if only for a moment, whether the rare matter in the Man's blood might be something a lot more poisonous. The things he touches, the things he sells. Do they get under the skin? Have they burned him from the

inside out?

This Man is a creature of the town, driven by petrol, pure narcotics and the international arms trade. But when other people come here from the country of his birth, to be shown into the orange flicker-light in the belly of the Carriage, do they immediately see him as the bringer of authority? As the representative of the grandfathers, the wisdom of the old can stop you dying of a snakebite and the patriarchs can decide whether you live or die on a whim? Not that he's old. To Valentine the Man looks no older than thirty, and Valentine's fairly sure *he* won't own a vehicle like this by the time he's thirty, even assuming he lives that long.

The clothes the Man wears seem older, somehow. A black suit, black jacket and black, reptilian shoes. Thick hair in plaits, tied back behind his head, a hint of jewellery at each ear—expensive-looking and with a hint of chic, but *ragged*. You get the feeling he was buried in this suit, and that it loosened itself on his body when he clawed his way out of the earth.

Valentine has made at least two attempts to start the conversation. His opening attempt to explain why he was here—a formality, given the Black Man must already know—was met with a single, lazy wave of the Man's arm. So far Valentine hasn't been able to fit the words to the throbbing of the sound system. The rhythm dictates everything here, right down to the human pulse. Valentine has no way of saying what he wants to say and getting it to fit the spaces between the snare drum and the crunching, gristle-heavy sound of the bass. The boy's got no rhythm.

Although when the Black Man finally opens his mouth and says 'I like your clothes'—something which Valentine is *fairly* confident in taking as a piece of sarcasm, especially considering the won't-go-away smile, so white that you can't see the gaps between the teeth—the words travel towards him on the back of the music as if they're etched right onto the CD. Words which, incidentally, also make Valentine hyper-aware of the fact that he's still got his uniform on.

1.30 Non-Sequitur, #2

Another recording. Same voice, same house, same circumstances. This time it goes:

'Go.

'Yes.

'Yes, we do. Is that a problem for you, Mr. Orphée?

‘No. We appreciate that. We wouldn’t ask you to do anything that…

‘…we understand.

‘Yes. We can supply you with most of the materials.

‘You’re still an unknown quantity. We can’t be found in possession…

‘We can arrange that.

‘We can arrange that. That won’t be a problem.

‘If you can arrange the transportation. Yes.

‘I’m glad you’re prepared to do that, Mr. Orphée. We can put you in touch with the relevant source.

‘No. We can give you everything you need for the mechanism.

‘Yes.

‘Yes.

‘We’re sure. Even a Ship. Nothing’s indestructible.

‘Afterwards?

‘I doubt that, Mr. Orphée, don’t you?

‘I’m glad to hear that.

‘Of course.

‘Of course.’

1.31 When?

‘Here’s the point,’ says Tiffany, kidding herself that she’ll finally be able to get to the point. ‘I’m only me ‘cause of the information that makes me, right?’

‘Mmmm,’ says the boy, obviously not convinced. Poor kid, thinks Tiffany. Sticking to his cells like they really mean anything. And just for that moment, she feels more superior than she’s ever felt in her life.

‘And that information’s all over the world now,’ she goes on, confident that she’s finally working up to what looks like a conclusion. ‘Everywhere. I mean, y’know, not just what I look like and stuff. Everything about me. My Executive thought it’d be a good idea if I didn’t have any secrets. You know?’

‘I know,’ nods the boy, who’s almost certainly seen a newspaper in the last eight months.

‘So that’s it,’ says Tiffany, with some triumph. She wipes a few flecks of powder off her top lip, like a kind of punctuation. ‘Sooner or

later, there's going to be too much in one place. Too much information about me in one place. And then…'

She lifts up one finger, by way of dramatic demonstration. The boy looks up from her calves and follows it.

'Mm?' he says, prompting her without wanting to interrupt her.

'…and then it's gonna be able to *think* like me. 'Cause when you think about it, the only reason this me is so special…' She playfully kicks her legs up and down a little, to demonstrate the version of her she's talking about. '… is 'cause there's more information here than anywhere else. Kind of won't be like that forever, though. And then… y'know… all the images are gonna be as smart as I am, and they're gonna have lives of their own, and… God, I don't know. Everything.'

'Is that possible?' asks the boy, meaning "that's not possible," with flattering undertones of "oh, no, really, I'm sure there'll only ever be one you." 'I mean… there's got to be a *lot* of stuff inside you. All your thoughts and memories and… things.'

Tiffany pouts a little. 'Guess more people have got memories about me than I've got memories. Look, this has never happened before, okay? There's never been this much information in the world before, ever. There's never been so many people and so much… *stuff*. Nobody knows what happens when you get all that stuff together in one place, 'cause until now the only place where there's been that much stuff is in people's heads. Right? Only it's *everywhere* now, and…'

She doesn't have many more words, though. So she gives an ominous look to the TV sets, making it quite clear who's the villain in this piece.

'…just *and*,' she says.

'I can't believe that,' says the boy, contradicting her outright at last, but only with a possible undertone of flattery. 'I can't believe there's more stuff about you out there than inside your own head. I can't believe your image is smarter than you are.'

Aww. Sweet.

1.32 The Others

How can Tiffany tell him the truth? How can she tell *anyone* the truth, let alone herself? The fact that she can easily, so easily, believe it. She can believe it because she sees her own image wherever she goes, and sometimes that image is doing things she doesn't remember doing, wearing clothes she's sure she's never owned or looking thinner than she's been since she was fifteen. (Her Executive insists this is

because the world is full of false images, of doctored pictures and computer-enhanced magazine shoots, but they've never explained whether these are also part of her fat-bottomed rapidly-expanding "uber-self," so it's hardly reassuring.)

But more importantly, she can believe it because—in all honesty—it doesn't feel as if there's a great deal on the inside. Not that she's stupid, and not that she's exactly badly-educated—she's been told that she has a certain acumen, whatever that means—but… well, shouldn't an identity be slightly more than this?

When was the last time she made a conscious, deliberate, definite decision? When was the last time she went somewhere of her own accord, or even stopped to wonder how she might get somewhere of her own accord? When was the last time she had an opinion that didn't involve her nail colour or the canapés on the rider?

By contrast, the many Tiffany Kortas she glimpses on her travels seem positively deep. *Hit* magazine said that she was one of the cleverest image-makers in pop, that her strategy for world domination was ingenious and that even her management company (meaning the Executive?) couldn't possibly have predicted her rise to glory. This was perhaps the first time she became aware that it might be happening, that one of her images might have already learned to act of its own free will. This is why she's been scanning her performances so closely, and why the latest batch of tapes scares her so much, even though she suspects it's an inevitable part of the process and that one day *everyone* will have doppelgangers.

This Tiffany Korta, the one who currently seems to carry the most information, feels far less substantial than her numerous reflections. Hardly surprising, given the way her Executive has been stage-managing her life. In fact it's almost as if they've been doing it deliberately, undermining her sense of being-there and making sure none of her opinions are too complicated, moving her from site to site so quickly that she might as well be transmitted along a fibreoptic cable. Almost as if they've been making sure that she grows less and less complex as her other iterations gain more and more depth.

Naaaaaah. They wouldn't do a thing like that, surely?

1.33 Industrial Landscape in Orange and Black

The route is known as Chemikaze Lane. It used to be known as Kamikaze Lane, thanks to the cracks and potholes where the tarmac's been wrenched open by force or forces unknown. But then the

chemical plants started pushing their way into the region, introducing new hazards for anyone navigating in the dark. These days most people assume Kamikaze Lane is its *actual* name, and that "Chemikaze" is the charmingly modern nickname. It's a constant evolution.

Up ahead, at the end of the road, is the tower block. Everyone around here knows the tower block. By night the work-crews come and go from the chemical plants, squat, bulky little men never seen in the light of day, who might be digging poisons out of secret mines for all anybody knows.

The servants of the Great Urban Horror, if you like. There are brief, spastic flashes of light from the plant buildings as they go on and off shift. There's brief, bloody, orange light in the sky when the men are working, not the kind of light that lets you see anything, just the kind that frames the buildings as shadows.

Which is how everyone thinks of the tower block. Great. Black. Monolithic. Silhouette. The only building of its kind left standing in the area. No lights in its windows, if indeed it has windows after midnight—it's possible the building seals itself up to become one great slab on the skyline, making its presence felt in the fits, starts and flashes made by the dwarven workers. Naturally, the tower looks darker in the chemical-light than the sky looks during the periods of complete blackness.

The significance of this tower is well-known. It's ostensibly the only place in the town—in the *world*—which isn't the Pit.

1.34 Leaving the Pit

The base of the tower.

Even down here, at the foot of the building, you can't see any windows. No lights from the many, many stories. There's only one way in, the door at the front of the edifice, just about the only feature that's visible.

Horror parks, badly, right in front of the door. She decides to leave the headlights on, although even apart from that there's a little light here—two lamps, old fittings in the crassest possible mock-Victorian style, one on either side of the entrance. Neither of them bright enough to shed light on anything other than the door itself. The front of the block probably used to be glass, part of a foyer when people lived here in numbers greater than one or two, but it's been bricked up or plastered over or just *sealed*, in the same mysterious way as the rest of the tower. So now there's just the door.

Hard not to be apprehensive, walking up to a door like this. Rusted metal, flecked in black. Inangela takes her mask off before she presses the buzzer, and stuffs it under her arm. She's not sure why. As far as she can tell there's no camera on the door, just a plastic grille drilled into the bricks. Or whatever the building's made of.

It takes a while for the response to come, enough time to start both Inangela and Horror whistling under their respective breaths. It's quiet here. Quiet enough that Inangela and Horror can tell when someone's listening to them. Nobody says "hello" from upstairs, nobody speaks through the plastic grille. There's just a vague clicking in the works. The sound of somebody, eleven floors and a hundred feet above, picking up a handset to listen to whoever's standing at the door.

Inangela steps forward towards the grille, although she forgets to clear her throat, something which really should be part of the ceremonial atmosphere.

'We're here as envoys from the Pit,' she announces.

And the grille makes a buzzing sound, and the door clicks open.

1.35 Man-Eaters

Valentine's stopped shifting in his seat now. His buttocks can't help but think of the phrase *careful, its vision is based on movement*. His body feels it'd be too dangerous to twitch, at least until this particular soundtrack ends. Only his chest moves, because he's simply got no option but to draw the lizard-candle air into his body. He tries to breathe slowly, but it just makes the scent worse. It's like breathing in skeletons.

The Black Man makes a gesture with his big Black Hand, the hand that's draped far-too-casually across the couch. He's made that gesture in response to almost everything Valentine's said to him. Fingers spreading wide, wrist turning in a manner that's dangerously suggestive of a royal wave. At the end of the gesture the hand plops back onto the skin of the coach, like a big cat that's too hot and bothered to go on the prowl for long. It's a gesture which might mean one, or all, of the following:

—It's not important.

—It's not a problem.

—This is the way things are.

—You think I care?

—We'll talk about this later.

—We won't talk about this at all.

But however you interpret it, the Man's smile stays scarred across his face and his eyes never open wide as he stares at Valentine.

This time, of course, things are different. This time the gesture indicates that the Man is about to speak of his own volition. This time there are overtones of: so…

Valentine tries to lean forward a little, to make sure he hears every word the Man says. It doesn't work. His back's stuck to the hide seat, the music stops him making any really violent moves and he's afraid of disturbing the candle-smoke anyway.

'SomethingI need to know,' says the Man. If his smile flickers at all, it's only because of the nature of the firelight.

1.36 The Negotiations

The Man has a somewhere-else accent, which Valentine assumes must be African. The English is impeccable, but there are great gaps between his pronouncements, where he lets his body language (or absence thereof) do most of the work. The words he *does* say stick together in little clusters, deep and heavy and as tacky as the rhino-seats. The accent gums the syllables together. "SomethingI" is one word.

Valentine risks a nod. The Black Man gestures again. This time it's a gesture *towards* something, apparently something in the future, perhaps an object or an event or both.

'This thing,' the Black Man says, as slow as the bass-rhythm behind him. 'This thing you've gottado. I need toknow… whether it's gonnabe*safe*.'

The word "safe" makes Valentine jump. Nearly. For the same reason it makes you jump when you see someone you know in a place you've never been before—the word "safe" doesn't belong here.

'It'll be fine,' says Valentine, automatically. *Damn.* It's the first thing that comes into his head because he's been thinking it ever since he swallowed some of Coz's pills.

The Man just keeps smiling. Just keeps staring. Valentine guesses he now has a chance to give a better answer. So he looks the Black Man in the lazy eye and says: 'We know what we're doing.'

Nice attempt. In fact there's no "we" tonight, and Valentine knows that whatever he does will be done alone, but he suspects he might be able to claw back some self-respect if he points out he's part of something bigger. And yes, the irony of this—getting his sense of self back by pretending to be a conspiracy—isn't lost on him.

But the Man's smile gets a little wider, and his head nestles further into the hide coach behind him.

'Ohhh, you'rethe expert?' he asks.

Valentine prickles. *Is he laughing at me here, or is he asking whether I'm the "expert" among the people I'm working for? Working with. People I'm working with.*

No, I think he's laughing at me.

'You… know who I'm with?' Valentine asks.

The Black Man nods, a little. Well, of course he knows.

'We know what we're doing,' Valentine repeats.

Another gesture from the man. Meaning, "it's no concern of mine." 'Sureyoudo,' he says. 'But what Ineed to know is… whereyougonna be doing it?'

And the music goes *boommmmm-CHAT*, qua- *boommmmm-CHAT*, even as Valentine starts to choke on the lizard-smoke.

1.37 This is What's Going Through Valentine's Mind:

1. 'I can't tell him that.

2. 'He could be fishing for information. He could be working for the police, or for one of the War-time powers, or…

3. '…don't be ridiculous.

4. 'I still can't tell him that.

5. 'The people I'm working *with* wouldn't want me to tell him that.

6. 'But he must know that the people I'm working with wouldn't want me to tell him that. So why's he asking?

7. 'He doesn't care what they'd want. He wants to know.

8. 'His people kill children and dump their bodies in rivers. His friends cut off limbs to make sure business deals go the right way.

9. 'Remember that man we picked up in the ambulance, almost a year ago now? The African man with the bald head and the gold bands on his wrists? Remember how he was found bleeding to death from his crotch, with his legs ripped open and his tongue all black and shrivelled up to nothing, and the roof of his mouth shredded after someone held him down and made him suck a burning crowbar?

10. 'Like that.

11. 'I can't tell him what he wants to know.

12. ‘If I don’t, he can have me tortured This car can take me where it likes. He’s got friends, followers, employees. I can’t hold out against that.

13. ‘Is the burning crowbar what they do to people who won’t talk? Is it supposed to be some kind of irony?

14. ‘I’m just a man who drives an ambulance, for Christ’s sake. Why am I here?

15. ‘Oh yeah.

16. ‘I can’t tell him what he wants to know.

17. ‘I’m not going to say anything.

18. ‘He could torture me.

19. ‘I’m not going to say anything. Not for the time being.

20. ‘Right.’

1.38 Going Up

You are now inside the tower block. You have now escaped from the Pit.

There are over twenty buttons inside the tower block’s lift, but only one of them is ever pushed: floor eleven, exactly halfway up the building’s great black mass. (Inangela likes that phrase. *Great black mass*. Like something a satanist would say to his host at a party.)

Some people would expect Miss Ruth to exist on the top floor of the building, given she and her companion are the only known residents. The fact that she lives exactly *halfway* up is suggestive. She moved in and her influence began to spread. First driving out the people on either side of her, then above, then below, moving from flat to flat and floor to floor until there was only her. Or so we assume. No other inhabitants of the tower have ever been seen, but it’s possible they’re there—goblin-people of her own, tending to her “collection.”

It’s also feasible that the “collection” fills every room in the block. Miss Ruth is known to be, or known to have been, a wealthy woman. She must have bought this place up piece by piece. She may have done this just to house her works; her life’s labour; her obsession; her analysis of the Pit.

‘Put the mask away,’ says Horror. ‘She won’t like it.’

‘She won’t even notice it,’ says Inangela. Even so, she starts to shuffle the things she’s brought with her, moving the mask from under her arm into her inside pocket and the videotape from her inside pocket to her outside pocket. Ready to be presented as tribute.

1.39 Videotape...

...there's something about the way videotape looks. Not just the tape itself, although that is, unquestionably, disturbing. It seems so natural to us now, but there's nothing in the human world to mirror it, this grotesque, supernaturally-smooth film that tells us something's wrong simply by its appearance.

(Think. The sight of blood upsets us so that we know there's a problem, a wound. We never see videotape under normal conditions. It's safe and secure, inside its black plastic cassette-shell. When it unravels itself from the cassette, or wraps itself around the heads of a faulty machine, then we panic at the very sight of it—it's slippery and it's dangerous and it's *wrong*. To touch it feels like a sin. You mustn't lay your fingers on it, no, because you can damage the image that way and nobody has the right to do that. Not even if you own the tape.)

And what about the shell itself, the suit of plastic armour that *ka-chacks* and *ka-chunks* whenever it's touched? Chitinous and beetle-like. Hard-edged and covered in ridges, like hundreds and hundreds of tiny battle-scars. Two white circles at the centre of the spools, lining up with two holes in the cassette casing but never quite precisely enough for comfort.

Hold any object for long enough and it seems strange. Stare at any human face, no matter how beautiful, and before long it reveals itself for what it is—a collection of features that evolved for purely practical, pragmatic reasons, held together by raw matter and spurious proportions. But videotape is much, much worse. Cradle the cassette in your hands, and feel its nature, scratch its surface. The insect-like *ka-chacking*. The rattle of something cool, hard and utterly hostile. The sense that inside the casing is a presence which mustn't be seen, mustn't be touched, which could hold any number of secrets and which refuses to give them up unless it's brought into contact with an equally inscrutable machine.

1.40 Big Girl

Unsurprisingly, Tiffany worries about her weight. Or perhaps it's more truthful to say she worries about her mass. She's been a good brood-mare for her Executive, and she's made plenty of wise couplings, using her not inconsiderable sexual charms to spread her image across the human world like a heatwave. As a result her image can be found virtually anywhere within two-million miles of here. She's enormous. Vast. Her face, figure and sense of poise could cover

continents.

But Gareth “Foxy” Taylor of the *Sun* has suggested her hips are too big, and this worries her. Her hips, and their infamously video-friendly ability to gyrate, were originally one of her key selling points. Nobody has ever implied she’s fat before.

Now it may seem, to an outsider, that Tiffany is becoming a little confused here. It may seem that she’s beginning to blur together her *cultural* mass, which is considerable, with the purely physical mass of what she’s trying not to think of as her “core” body. But she’s learned, mainly from the mistakes of others, that the two are by no means separate. She knows for a fact, for a *fact*, that if she moves from cocaine to chocolate then she could weigh anything up to 160 pounds within two weeks. And she knows that if she did, then her culture-body would bloat even more quickly—her inflated image would cover the world, the pictures of her massive, swollen form carried to every city that’s ever heard of her. Which would sound tempting, except that according to her Executive this rapidly-generated, fat-bodied cultural mass would be short-lived, and an overweight conceptual Tiffany Korta would soon wither and die.

The relationship is puzzling. The rules are hard to fathom. She has to become as large as possible, but judging by “Foxy” Taylor’s testimony her immensity has caused her pelvis to appear grotesquely overblown. There are, sadly, no doctors she can consult on this matter and only the Executive offers any clues. If she loses mass in some specific area of the world, perhaps by banning the local press there from reproducing her image, then will her hips become acceptable again? It seems likely.

1.41 How?

‘So, uhh…’

Ooh. Here it comes. Tiffany can feel it, thanks to the finely-honed but short-lived social instincts that come with cocaine.

‘So where did you, ahh… how long have you been interested in…’

What the boy wants to ask is, “where did you get all this stuff about doppelgangers and uber-selves from.” It’s quite inconceivable that Tiffany might have come up with it by herself. She could feasibly get angry about that assumption, except that she’s in no mood to be angry, and anyway the assumption happens to be perfectly correct.

‘…this is heavy stuff,’ the boy concludes.

Wham! Nicely done. Makes it sound like a compliment.

So as a special reward, Tiffany tells him: 'I got it from Faction Paradox.'

Oh dear. *Now* look at his face. Not disgusted, not even really disappointed, but… no pop personality has ever come out and said "gee, isn't Faction Paradox great?," that would spoil it for everyone. No act has even spoken the name in public, except for the tribe of Waco Black, which sees it as competition and wants to decry it.

'No,' Tiffany reassures him, with a coy and not entirely un-sexy smile on her face because she knows that what she's about to say will just compound the damage. But fuck it, she's flying now. 'I mean, like, the *real* Faction Paradox.'

Doesn't believe her. She almost bursts out laughing at the look on his face, as his features shift around in an attempt to remain tactful. But laughing would ruin it.

'How do you… how do you know when it's the *real* Faction Paradox?' he says, which is precisely what she expected.

'Masks,' she tells him.

1.42 Masks

Hmm. The pedigree of the Faction masks is uncertain. The masks of the original Faction—the mythical Faction—were, and are, an integral part of the legend. The concept-album version tells us there were bones buried in the foundations of the world, or perhaps more accurately in the foundations of history itself. There were Giants in the Earth in those days. The archons of the Faction were the only ones who understood this curious archaeology well enough to burrow right down into the strata of the continuum and pull up the skeletons.

It was out of those bones that they carved the first masks. Some versions of the continuity hold that the bat-skull design, now a crypto-corporate logo with no crypto-corporation to support it, represents the skull of a particular kind of entity. Others hold the early masks were carved out of immense spinal columns, whose heads were never found. Mystery animals, either way.

But as we all know, in this universe time-travel is as impossible as black magic, as impossible as finding real Red Mercury, as impossible as removing the foil lid of a black-cherry yoghurt intact. Easy to see where the story comes from. We all remember a proto-time full of giants, because we were all babies once and remember looking up at the dizzying, nauseating heights of our parents. We believe in the wisdom of ancients because there really was a time when everybody knew better than us. We all look for relics because we all have a

personal prehistory to deal with.

It's unimportant. Even the suggestion that there was once a formal institution by the Faction's name means, by definition, that there were formal ranks. This isn't something which would interest Inangela, but it must surely have been one of the things that drew Tiffany to her Executive. *Father* Danzael. *Mother* Nod. These titles suggest family. They also suggest religion, and Tiffany's parents were Catholic, remember. They suggest something which goes beyond the purely genetic, and makes the idea of "relationships" somehow bigger, wider and more important.

Though she wouldn't vocalise it quite this way, the truth is that Tiffany Korta isn't banking on being genetic for very much longer. So this must be the ideal family environment for her, mustn't it?

1.43 The Waiting Room

Beyond the lift is a waiting room. It's not the largest of spaces, and there's the smell of intimacy and coffee in the air, but it's a room with invisible walls. There are black curtains draped over every surface, giving you the sense that the room goes on forever, but that if you wanted to keep walking then you'd have to force your way through more and more layers of material until the black satin simply exhausted you and made sure you never woke up. Several black leather sofas, worn enough to look comfortable without looking cheap, lounge around as if *they're* the ones who deserve furniture.

The temptation to throw yourself onto one of those great, plump, majestic sofas is—for Inangela, at least—as strong as the urge to drive a spoon through the seal on a jar of coffee. The atmosphere speaks of opulence, and an instinct for sensuality. The air percolates. The carpet's the colour of cream. Somewhere beyond the curtains, there are mumbling voices with treble and bass that don't quite fit human normal—a conversation heard on a TV set, the carefully-timed gaps between the lines giving away the fact that it's staged drama. Except that here, you could believe the characters are waiting in the wings and delivering their speeches between sips of café au lait.

1.44 Jacqueline

Then Jacqueline appears from between two of the curtains, in such a smooth, fluid fashion that you'd swear she could vanish between any two lines of satin and re-appear anywhere else in the room. She looks like a piece of the decor, the missing link between humanity and exquisite furnishing. She remains absolutely vertical as she moves. A

painfully tight collar around her neck; a starched white blouse, around a skittle-shaped figure that somehow looks perverse without being in any way sexual; a waist band ("belt" would make it sound like fashion rather than engineering); a black knee-length skirt that surely shouldn't allow her legs to move at all. Dark hair tied so tightly behind her head that it looks moulded. A face that desperately wants to be a mannequin's. The cheekbones of a surgeon's daughter.

Like the model of a Victorian schoolgirl. Or *a* model of a Victorian schoolgirl. Miss Ruth expects discipline from her assistant, or her servant, or her paramour, whichever Jacqueline happens to be.

Jacqueline's carrying a tray in her hands, her fingers stiff enough to suggest that they were moulded in plastic specifically for this task, and on first sight it looks as if this is where the smell of the coffee comes from. But Inangela knows better. The smell is a fixture here, and it works the other way around. The atmosphere condenses itself into the cups to make coffee. The girl glides over to Inangela and Horror, her razor-sharp heels not making a sound on the thick carpet.

'Your coat?' Jacqueline asks, as if she's got any hands free to take it.

Inangela knows better than to argue with this. Nobody keeps their coat on here. Already, she's starting to feel like a shambling mess compared to the environment around her. She begins to slip off her jacket.

'And how is the Pit this evening?' Jacqueline asks, formally.

'Oh… you know,' says Horror. 'Full of monsters and stuff.'

'I see,' says Jacqueline, quite seriously.

1.45 The Nature of the Pit

There are mystics who speak of the Abyss of Hallucinations: that great, terrible gulf which exists between the seeker-of-knowledge and whatever remains of the Truth after all these years.

It's an Abyss of daemons, of flights of fancy, of distractions and temptations beyond number. ("Beyond number," it's supposed, because anyone who might attempt to cross the Abyss will always bring his or her own distractions and temptations along for the journey, thus ensuring that the Abyss is always fully-stocked and will never, ever run out of monstrosities.)

Like everything in mysticism, it's all code. This particular Hell doesn't represent a specific place, or even a particular state of mind. It represents the world. It represents what's real, in as far as the seeker will attempt to understand what's real. That's why the only daemons

there are the ones the seeker takes with probably-him. Like the rats in Room 101. The more you look into the Abyss, the more you examine this world in detail, the more you give form to your own prejudice.

Miss Ruth doesn't live in the Pit. The Abyss of Hallucinations ends at the door to the tower block, or so she claims. She reinforces this by refusing to grant entrance to anybody, even those she knows well, unless they first acknowledge that they're (at best) ambassadors or (at worst) refugees. She's fully aware that her guests bring much of the Pit with them when they enter, but if they 'come as envoys from the Pit' then they at least face up to what they are, and perhaps even become something else while they're in her company. In her view, what's found in her home is the Truth. However, she may well be the only one who can perceive it properly. At least for the time being.

Best not to let the coffee and plump sofas fool you. Leaving the Pit can be a hazardous process. And Miss Ruth is not a woman to be taken lightly.

1.46 They Who Have Power to Hurt

By now Valentine's established, or thinks he's established, where the Black Man comes from. The Man does indeed seem to be West African, the spawn of a tribe which still calls itself by its tribal name, not as common as anyone might think. What's interesting, though Valentine isn't currently aware of it, is what's survived of this tribe in the modern, sugar-pumped, polyester-electrical age.

The name of the tribe is now generally used not to refer to a people, but to the people's own assembly of higher powers, its culture of black angels, blacker daemons and blackest-of-all fetishes. That's all the outside world remembers. Not the flesh and blood, just the totems. And lest we start to think of these foreign types as savages in grass skirts, or at least savages in nylon shirts and cheap reproduction New York Yankees baseball caps, let's remind ourselves that these people know the concept of *threat* in a way that most of the world simply doesn't.

Their version of Satan is a snake, the serpent-mother who represents poison as much as deceit, death at least as much as a greater moral evil. This seems reasonable. Go to the village where the Black Man's parents brought him into the world, and you'll find every human being there knows somebody who's died of a single bite to the ball of the foot. Those who escape to glorious civilisation in the west will never willingly look upon the face of any snake—not even on television, not even if that snake's a cartoon, a Muppet or an unconvincing prop in an action movie.

Is it any wonder that the *bizongu* hold on to so much power, even as the people who created them become assimilated into the overall fat-pumped mass of humanity? The totems have been exported across the face of the world. It's common knowledge, among those of the tribe who arrive in the hi-tech world, that every airport has a secret terminal—a Black Terminal—allowing the formless, slick-skinned Black Aeroplanes to bring the witch-covens all the way from Africa without being intercepted. Yes: Black Carriages really have taken that next evolutionary step, to mirror the sleek, black, near-invisible aircraft of the modern (or pre-War) military. The covens will, provably, kill those who break old vows to old lodges. Nobody escapes the justice of witches.

1.47 Vows

Vows are important to these people. This, ultimately, is why the Black Man makes himself look like a magician in his lair: a reminder that all deals must be straight, all promises must be kept and all debts must be paid, because those who oversee such transactions—be it a simple matter of money or a bond of secrecy to a coven—can reach between continents. It's a system of thought which has out-lasted the genetic purity of its creators, which draws no distinction between religious duty and personal business, which has (on at least one prior occasion) led to the headless, limbless torso of an African child being fished out of a river in the middle of a modern metropolis. Naturally, however, nothing like that ever happens in *this* town.

1.48 The Guarantee

Valentine is looking out of the window. He's trying to keep his eyes *off* the Black Man, every inch of skin prickling with sweaty angst and telling him that if he keeps looking out of the window for *one second more* then the Black Man will take it as an insult and turn him into a headless, limbless corpse in the river. And it's been like this ever since the Man asked Valentine that great, fundamental "where" question.

The Black Man gestures.

Valentine's head immediately, instinctively snaps around to face him.

The Man's still smiling, but Valentine's sure there's some real amusement there this time. Why? Because Valentine's trying to avoid a difficult question, and it shows?

'See now,' says the Man, and the African accent's thicker on his

tongue than ever. ‘Igot… an *attachment*.’

You can tell he’s trying out the word for the first time. Valentine is puzzled, and admits it. ‘An attachment…?’

This time, the Man’s gesture is aimed at the space around him. The whole of the shrine-car, Valentine included. ‘This. Here. Skin.’

Skin…? Oh: he means his *own* skin.

‘See, I wouldn’twantto lose any of this,’ he goes on, slow as you like. ‘Wouldn’twantto lose any of my… *business*. Even for you and your friends.’

Valentine is now no longer sure whether he’d be relieved or horrified if the Man stopped smiling. He tries to work out what he’s really being told here.

‘You’re saying… when I do what I’m going to do… will it damage your, ahh…’ (He really, really has no way of finishing this.) ‘… will it *affect* you?’ he tries.

A gesture from the Man. Meaning, “what do *you* think?”

‘I don’t needto know what you’regonnado,’ he says. ‘Who you are, who you’reworkingfor… that’s nothing. That’s nothing at all. But what I *need* to know… I needto know that it’s not going to be here.’

Here?

‘You mean… in this town?’ asks Valentine.

‘Nnn-hnn,’ says the Man.

And Valentine breathes again, realising he’s probably not going to be tortured at all, or even asked what he and his co-conspirators in the Faction are planning. He just has to give an assurance. That’s all. And if he chokes when he gives it, well, that’s only because he breathed a little *too* easily and the lizard-bone-tang of the candle-smoke is now coating the back of his throat.

‘It’s not going to be in the town,’ he says. ‘It’s not going to be anywhere like here.’

1.49 Question…

…is this a lie that Valentine’s telling?

If the average inhabitant of this town had said it then yes, it’d be a lie. Once Valentine picks up the merchandise from the Black Man, he intends to use it in a location that’s technically—geographically—within town limits. But the line ‘anywhere like here’ is a dead give-away. For him the War is a kind of space and a kind of time in itself, which intersects with the world only at specific points and changes

the rules wherever it passes. That's what wars generally do, of course. They allow people who believe they could "never, ever" kill another human being to kill without compunction, and all because the war has been positively identified as a war (it really doesn't take much brainwashing… all you need to turn an ordinary human being into an assassin is one little declaration). But if a country at war is a different place to a country at peace, then this War takes the process a step further. At least the way Valentine sees things.

This War is its own location. He's planning on using the Black Man's merchandise to enter that War. Hence he's not lying.

But he's sitting in a car with someone from a culture in which anyone who crosses you is ritually tortured to death, so let's hope that other people share this view.

1.50 Valentine and the Faction (1)

Valentine's association with the group he thinks of as Faction Paradox began a little over a year ago. It began in much the way that you'd expect, given what we know about Valentine. It began at a political demonstration.

You have to understand, though… there was a time, in the days before that and before the War, when political demonstrations were very different. On Demonstration Day—not an official title, but every year had at least one Demonstration Day, the exact date chosen according to a pattern as impenetrable as the War itself—there'd be factions on all sides and soap-boxes on every corner. Usually it'd begin in a square, stocked with stone testaments to great military leaders from the days when nobody got to see the bodies of the enemy. On Demonstration Day the squares would be like markets, doubly so if the Day happened to fall in one of the summer months and every casual debate could take place in the blazing sun. Those were the optimistic days, when everyone knew the War existed but nobody expected it to intersect with the world they knew. People could talk then. Bonds could be made. Flags and effigies could be playfully, ceremonially burnt and it'd only bring people closer together.

And so what if the demonstrations never did any good? So what if the Parliaments and Senates of the world looked on every dissenter as a gypsy or a clown or an anarchist or a vandal or (if they were lucky) a target for the intelligence services? So what if the politicians talked about the importance of peaceful protest in a civilised society, even as they roundly ignored it? Like Brigadoon, or like a rock festival, the Bazaar of Dissent was a location which only existed for short, eccentric intervals. The punters may have come away with badges and

buttons and signs and pamphlets in a hundred exotic colours, but each little token represented a whole system of meaning, and every exchange made those meanings more complete and more complex.

You couldn't have a Demonstration Day now, not under War conditions. They tried, fourteen months ago, on the day that Valentine first heard the name of Faction Paradox. Need it be said that the two events weren't unconnected?

1.51 Who?

'Then, um,' says the boy. Tiffany suddenly notices, in a powder-fuelled moment of clarity, that he's trying not to stare at the soles of her feet. The armpit thing was evidently off the mark in his case. 'Then, um… these people you work for…'

'Oh, work *with*,' says Tiffany, wriggling her toes experimentally to see what happens.

'These people are, um… Faction Paradox? The *real* Faction Paradox?'

'Uh-huh.' Tiffany nods, three times in quick succession. Legions of interviewers have described this habit as "cute."

'But I thought, uh… I thought you said there wasn't anyone sort of… real?'

And all of a sudden, she's experiencing the only-partly-familiar sensation of all the powder freezing in her bloodstream.

'Suhwuhh?' she says, hoping it'll take the place of, "Sorry, what?"

'It's just… I don't know if that's right, what you said,' the boy explains. 'About nobody being, being a real person. But, you know… if it's right about people, then it's got to be right about something like Faction Paradox. Hasn't it?'

The foil wrapper is on the floor between them. Tiffany idly starts tapping it with one finger, beating out her own rhythm. Part of her psyche is realising that she's already figured out where this conversation's leading her, and part of it is wondering whether she should finish off the contents of the wrapper before she leaves. Meanwhile, one very, very small part is starting to remember something she overheard at a party almost a year ago. Like a rumour. Or a clue buried in a mystery script.

'Get my bag,' she tells the boy. 'Oh…wait. Do I have to fuck you for that? Never mind. Just get my bag.'

In the end, she gives him the left-over cocaine as a tip.

1.52 Seventh Sense, Theoretical

The world is training people to do the impossible, that much is certain. Call it what you like. Say you're hooked up to the culture-in-general. Maybe there *aren't* any doppelgangers yet, but…

…but when she was a child, living in the bosom of her family in Little Cuba, Tiffany Kortez (later Korta) started to realise she was psychic in a very specific, and admittedly not terribly useful, way. She was television-psychic. She knew, instinctively, which advertisement was going to be the last advertisement of the commercial break before the programme started again. She could tell, with the sound turned right down, when the announcer was explaining that programmes had been re-scheduled even though there was nothing more on the screen than the standard station ID. She could sense the approach of the words "and the next episode of this series will be shown in *two* weeks' time" even though she was barely old enough to read the TV guide.

Instinct? Subconscious perception? There are patterns in the schedules, after all, and a four-year-old girl can notice them even if she doesn't realise it. And what if that girl's been exposed to this medium all her life? It's not just that it's done so much to her brain. It must have done so much to her cells. Cycles of light and heat from the TV set. Magnetic patterns from the video recorder. Electrical rhythms brushing against the skin, picked up by the living tissue. Becoming a literal seventh sense.

We can believe this. But we won't be able to believe Miss Ruth.

1.53 Seventh Sense, Applied

The first time Inangela went to the tower block—without Horror for moral support—she took a videotape as a kind of tribute for Miss Ruth, something she now sees as an established custom even if she's not sure Miss Ruth sees it that way. Less wisely, she took the tape there in a brightly-coloured cardboard sleeve, and even labelled it with a fluorescent orange sticky-label marked MY TOWN (I.M.).

On that occasion Jacqueline took the tape from Inangela in the waiting room, checking it in case someone was trying to plant a magnetic bomb inside the collection. There was very nearly a look of distaste on Jacqueline's face then, as if she couldn't understand why *anybody* would try presenting her a tape in something as gross as cardboard. Inangela wasn't immediately sure why this strange doll-faced girl stared at the tape for so long, when there wasn't much to see on the sticker.

‘Oh,’ Jacqueline said. Not a hint of judgement anywhere in her voice. ‘Amateur footage.’

Which was, indeed, what was on the tape. At the time, Inangela assumed it was just a neat piece of deduction.

Later, she saw Jacqueline find a specific tape from the collection at Miss Ruth’s request. The tape was one of those stored inside Miss Ruth’s inner sanctum, not the largest part of the collection by any means, but even the sanctum must be home to a couple thousand cassettes. None of them boxed or labelled. Jacqueline found the right tape after only a moment’s hesitation, Miss Ruth keeping an eye on her all the time, clearly planning on “disciplining” the girl if it took her too long.

Eventually it dawned on Inangela that Jacqueline could tell what was on the tapes just by looking at them. She asked about it, in the end, but only once they were back in the friendly, video-free, coffee-scented space of the waiting room.

‘Yes,’ Jacqueline told her, which is a fairly typical Jacqueline response.

‘So, ehh… how’s that possible?’ Inangela asked.

‘Discipline,’ Jacqueline told her.

1.54 Long Shot—

Don’t laugh. There was a time when your parents wouldn’t even have understood the things you see on television now, when the lights and the sounds you take for granted would have been impenetrable to them. Did you know that when the early motion pictures started building whole stories, instead of just making trick-movies about dogs being turned into sausages, the films actually had to explain what a close-up was? Imagine that: seeing a close-up for the first time. Sitting there in the darkened theatre, seeing the flickering, clunking, black-and-white scene in front of you being suddenly replaced by one enormous screen-sized detail, the face of one of the characters or a significant clue being held between the detective’s fingers. Experiencing that sudden

1.55 —Close Up—

(Inangela’s coat lies folded on one of the sofas in Miss Ruth’s waiting room, black leather on black leather. It’s folded in such a way that you can see the top half of the Faction mask, the dark curves of the eyes peeking over the fabric of the pocket. Twenty-five minutes

from now, while Inangela and Horror are in Miss Ruth's inner sanctum, another visitor to the tower block will enter the waiting room and lean across to touch the bony white surface—just to make sure it isn't a *real* mask, if there is such a thing. The visitor will be troubled by the thought that the Executive might have sent one of its spies after her, but to be frank she'll also be faintly reassured.)

1.56 —Long Shot

shift in perspective. There must have been a moment when you saw your first close-up, but imagine being part of a generation which actually *remembers* that moment. The brief second of confusion as your attention was forced from the big to the small.

Your grandparents watched films they only understood on one level. Your parents watched films they understood on two. Inangela can watch a film and see at *least* four, more if she's on a rush. Her great-great-grandchildren, should she have any, will be able to see so many levels that they'll look back at her and think she must have been some kind of cultural Neanderthal.

You think it's so ridiculous, being able to see videotape without a machine to come between you and it? Ask your future spawn what *they* think.

Assuming the War doesn't kill the lot of them. Or do something far, far worse.

1.57 Weaponry

Valentine has had time to think about the assurance he gave the Black Man. This probably isn't a good thing. At the moment the Man doesn't seem to realise that Valentine's answer might, possibly, have been a distortion of the truth. The heavy throb of the bass is pretty much in tempo with Valentine's pulse, and it didn't speed up or get louder or change in any way when he swore that the material wouldn't be used inside town limits, even though he was half-expecting it to.

'Do you have it, um… here?' Valentine asks.

The Black Man doesn't reply, at first. Not even a gesture. He just sits there with his eyelids drooping and his smile not dropping an inch.

'It'snotaproblem,' he says, eventually.

Valentine tries to look as though this reassures him. 'Okay. And you, ahh… you've been paid?'

A gesture. Meaning, “the money’s enough.”

(Valentine isn’t sure how this part of the arrangement works. He knows that his—oh, let’s be euphemistic—*partners* in the Faction have already arranged payment. He already knows he’s just being used to do the front-line part of the job. Only now, however, does it occur to him this could all be some colossal sting operation. After all, wouldn’t the materials cost a fortune? Why would they end up in a town like this one? Is he *really* the ideal person for the job?)

‘You wannadothis?’ asks the Black Man.

Valentine jumps, a little.

Now what’s the Man asking him? Whether he’s sure he wants to go through with this? No: the Man’s already got the money, or at least it’s been taken care of. He feels like he’s being tested, and he has no idea what the correct procedure is.

He gives the answer which seems most obvious. He says:

‘I’m ready.’

God, could he have said *anything* more likely to make him sound like he’s new to all of this?

But now the Black Man’s moving, and it’s the first time Valentine has seen him move, *really* move, since he was sucked into this place. The Man’s movements are slow, relaxed, perfectly in synch with the slow-motion music and the slow-motion air. He’s opening one of the black, crocodile-leathery panels that line the “walls” of this place. If this were a normal Limo, Valentine would assume it was the drinks cabinet.

The panel flips open, much too quickly for a shrine like this one. By the time Valentine realises that he’s looking straight at the merchandise, the Black Man has already hauled it out of its compartment and placed it on the floor between them. The *gangggg* of metal briefly breaks the pulse of the music.

The merchandise, once Valentine has blinked enough times to focus on it, comes in the form of a metal container. It doesn’t look like any kind of container he recognises. It’s little more than a corrugated metal tube, resting on its end, no more than a foot high and no more than six inches across. There are dents, scrapes and rust-bruises all the way along its length. It looks, for all the world, like something that’s spent its life living in a dark place.

The cap on the cylinder—black, and with a tough metal grip attached—is shinier, newer, than the rest. He guesses it’s been replaced recently. He wonders what happened to the old cap, and how many people might have been poisoned to death before a new one

was found.

Having revealed the merchandise, and exerted himself far, far too much, the Black Man leans back into the skin-folds of his couch and adopts exactly the same position that he's always had. To the inch, Valentine's sure of it.

'Red Uranium,' he says.

'That's… it?' asks Valentine. Oh, so very weak.

'Half,' says the Man.

The word "half" is often used by dealers in illegal materials. Usually, however, it's used to mean "half an ounce." Not "half a critical mass."

1.58 On Red Uranium

Red Uranium. Two steps removed from any conventionally-accepted version of modern history, and therefore a material with twice the totemic importance of Red Mercury. It's never been seriously suggested, in all the years since nuclear, pretend-nuclear and merely radioactive matter started appearing on the black market, that Red Uranium is *actually* uranium taken from the Soviet Union's "lost" nuclear weapons. No, no, no. That may be the source of Red Mercury, but Red Uranium is a creature reared in the wild. It *evolved* from the Red Mercury that escaped those secret, terrible research labs—evolved in the popular consciousness, anyway, the inevitable next step in the development of something rare, terrible and glorious.

What does Red Uranium do? Like anything that's sold in the modern world, it's best to keep quiet about its exact properties until the consumer's already paid. Even if it only produces an "ordinary" nuclear detonation in terms of hard science, the impact of such a device on the world's psyche would be remarkable in itself. Those who deal in material purporting to be Red Uranium tend to be African or Afro-Caribbean rather than European, so when it arrives in the "civilised" world the material's already cloaked in at least one protective layer of mystique. Like Red Mercury, but unlike more conventional dirty-bomb materials, it comes pre-packaged in the icons of the witch-lodges and the Black Terminals.

Those touched by this material can expect a blank-eyed, pale-skinned living death as well as the usual symptoms of sickness and cellular retardation. They can expect the radiation poisoning to slow their metabolic functions to a standstill, so they remain self-aware but display no signs of life. They can expect premature burial. They can expect to be dug out of the ground, brain-damaged and with

blackened skins, to become the servants of whatever local crime-lords know the most about manipulating the *bizongu* and the elemental powers of Red Uranium itself.

A bomb? A bomb could kill thousands, even millions, and who knows? Maybe every single casualty, human or otherwise, would rise up out of the dust in the aftershock. (The echo of Hiroshima can still be heard today, if you can find the right frequency, but at least Hiroshima left no zombies.) Yet no such bomb has ever been used, despite the number of West African lodges currently claiming to own stockpiles of the material.

Which brings us back to Valentine's questions. Why here? Why now? Why him?

1.59 The Big Adventure

Tiffany has decided she likes the boy she gave the cocaine to in the hotel room. On the way out of the building, once she's successfully avoided any patrolling members of the Executive, she decides the next time she's at the hotel she'll try to find him again. And if not have sex with him then at least let him kiss her toes. Who knows? It might produce something strange and precious in the media.

What's Tiffany forgotten? Of course, it's obvious. She's forgotten there isn't just *one* hotel, and that she'll probably never be coming back to this town again, at least not in the most grossly physical way.

2. Travel Time

2.00 Making the Bomb

This has been said before, but:

Constructing a nuclear device isn't difficult. Even to say that is to say something fundamentally worthless. Of course it's not difficult. Of course it doesn't matter how "easily available" the information is. All that matters, all that's *hard* is getting hold of the raw material, and if you've got over 110 pounds of uranium-235, and if you know how to work a soldering iron and how to set the timer on a VCR then you can build a bomb. Anywhere. Any time.

But uranium-235… the philosopher's stone of modern alchemy. So precious that any attempt to manufacture it would cripple most countries, unless those countries happen to have a near-totalitarian control of their people's resources or enough built-in terror to justify an arms race. Which is why no corporate concern has even been *tempted* to use nuclear fission to change the conditions of the international markets (and oh, it'd be so easy otherwise). This is how its done:

Nuclear fission occurs when a certain amount of uranium, the critical or supercritical mass, is brought into a small enough space. All nuclear devices, professional or otherwise, involve the uranium being split into two halves. (The usual alchemical rule applies. Nothing happens until the two primal elements are fused together in the crucible. Charmingly, four-hundred years ago they called this the *elemental marriage*. Military-built bombs even shape the two halves into a "bolt" and a "hole.") The two halves are placed a short distance apart inside whatever you want to use as a bomb-casing, "facing" each other because you're bound to feel as if it matters, and you'll probably end up thinking about the old mystics' symbol of two snakes eating each others' tails. Or even one snake eating its own tail, given both halves are the same element. The important thing is that surrounding the uranium, on either side of the bomb casing, is a quantity of conventional explosive.

The finishing touches. A couple of detonator caps placed in the explosive. The caps are wired to either a remote-control device or a timer mechanism. You might need someone with *real* electrical skills to do this, but if you don't have time to learn and don't trust anyone else, there's also the "suicide" option. You can set the explosive off manually. Try shooting it. Whatever the method, the blast joins the

two halves of the U-235 into a single critical mass, and the resulting explosion is capable of killing thousands. 300,000 men, women and children—because symbolically speaking you must *never forget the children*—were just two days' work at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and let's bear in mind, the world was a smaller place then.

These days most large-scale criminal concerns are capable of supplying *some* form of nuclear material, but as with Red Mercury this can be unpredictable. Many of those who want to illicitly obtain weapons-grade matter want to do so purely for the sake of "going nuclear," which is why any form of uranium (235 or otherwise) has a market value. It's what Faction cultists would call a *fetish*. The supposed existence of the "dirty bomb," designed to spread radiation sickness in civilian populations rather than cause a real-life, honest-to-goodness nuclear explosion, is generally assumed to be a result of zealots and terrorists wanting a cheap and easy way to create havoc even though their contacts can't supply them with the ingredients of a complete bomb. Of course it isn't. It's the inevitable result of an underground culture which just wants that one brief smack of the totem-atomic. To be able to say, *we've called on the same powers as you military-industrial bastards and look how scared you are now*.

So the lesson's simple. Any nuclear material that might be found on the black-market is likely, if not guaranteed, to be a damn sight less impressive than U-235. Even if weapons-grade material *has* leaked out of some fallen empire somewhere, anyone who gets their hands on it will be more likely to sell it where the money is, to governments rather than private concerns. If any material ends up at street level, its qualities are likely to be ritualistic as much as explosive.

As if that isn't enough to do any damage.

2.01 The Hall

Beyond the curtains in the waiting room there must be a door, although no wall or door-frame becomes visible as you pass through it. The area on the other side is quite specifically another room, vast and self-contained and appalling, its ceiling higher, bewilderingly higher, than the room you've just left behind (an optical illusion, surely?). A hallway as much as a chamber, the Last Mile before Miss Ruth's inner sanctum. The walls are in black satin, but here they're lined with…

…you could say "bookshelves," although books were never intended to be put to rest here. Each block of shelves must be at least twice as tall as (to pick a random example) Inangela, but it's no use using exact measures, because this place renders all numbers equally useless.

The shelves are lined with videotapes. That doesn't sound bad at all, does it? You think of video shops, or libraries at the very least. You think of a choice of a thousand different movies, all with brightly-coloured spines, like a collection of chocolate-wrappers pinned to the walls.

It's not like that. It's not like that at all. They're not in cases, and they're not marked, not with a single label or a single letter. Blocks of black plastic, taller than giants and wider than Inangela's arse, the cassettes squeeze next to each other on the shelves with nothing to tell apart the thousands, tens of thousands, *hundreds* of thousands that must be here. Carelessly, some of them protrude further from the shelves than others, like beetles trying to crawl over each other to be nearest to the food supply.

There's a reason that videotapes get dressed in coloured packaging. There's an atavistic fear that human beings suffer, when they're faced with something black and insect-like and with no human features. One cassette and it's barely noticeable.

A dozen, all piled up on top of each other, and you start to find yourself thinking: *colony*.

A hundred-thousand, or two-hundred thousand, or more… it changes things. The sheer volume of them here makes it hard to judge scale, because you're in *their* world now and everything has to be measured in tape instead of organic, human ideals like "feet." There's the factory-smell of plastic, of chemically-bonded polymers and magnetic film. The video tape leaves sour air in the same way that ants leave formic acid.

So many cassettes. Making Inangela want to scream and run along the hallway, pushing them all back so they don't seem to be crawling out of the shelves. Imagine being buried under them, the cockroach-like *ka-chack, ka-chack, ka-chack* as they fall on top of you. The sound of your fingernails scraping against the plastic.

'I fucking *hate* this place,' says Horror.

She tries to say it quietly, so that Jacqueline doesn't hear it. It's a wasted effort, since every slightest noise here echoes off the hard, shiny shells of the tapes. But Jacqueline, fortunately, is trained not to respond. She just keeps leading them towards the end of the hallway.

2.02 The Trick

The second time Inangela asked Jacqueline about being able to "read" videotape, she pushed the point and managed to get half a conversation out of it.

‘No, really,’ she said. ‘How do you do that? Is it magnets or something?’

A fair guess. Images are stored on videotape as patterns of magnetism. It’s feasible, *almost* feasible, that if someone spent their life surrounded by VCR then they’d be sensitive enough to… well, you get the idea. It’s not as if Jacqueline had an answer much more comprehensive than:

‘Discipline.’

‘Yeah, but… what kind of discipline?’

‘It’s quite simple,’ said Jacqueline, although she said it in a way that made it sound almost painful. A way that said, *Miss Ruth has beaten me every day for the last year in order to make me understand that it’s simple, and there are scars on my back and my backside, and it hurts even to think of it, but I’m happy to have made this sacrifice.*

‘Yes?’ Inangela prompted.

‘You have to leave the Pit behind,’ Jacqueline told her.

‘You mean, the real world?’

‘It’s not real,’ snapped Jacqueline. Obviously feeling Inangela dig her nails into the whip-scars.

2.03 All Ye Who Enter

But now Jacqueline stands at the end of the great hallway, beyond the breeding, hatching colonies of cassettes, and prepares to open the curtains there.

And it’s now that Inangela realises—the delicate, shiny satin is supposed to mirror the magnetic tape inside the cassettes, giving the collection a sense of context, giving the insects a kind of hive.

And there’s another thing Inangela always wonders at this stage. She wonders if Miss Ruth is even *capable* of passing this point, of passing through the great hall herself. Here in the tower she guards the Truth, safe from the Pit—and it’s known she can “see” the magnetic shadows of several cassettes at once, perhaps *all* the cassettes at once. There are thousands of tapes inside the sanctum itself, it’s true, but it seems at least feasible that she might step out into the hallway whenever she wants to see the Truth head-on. To see the collection in a single glance, to see all the worlds stored inside all the beetle-shells.

Inangela has heard that Miss Ruth can receive every television station in the world, here inside the tower. All those cables and satellite feeds, leading here into the heart of the edifice… what they

do, if Inangela understands the process correctly, is refine the Truth. They take the raw material of the Abyss of Hallucinations, the news stories and the vox pops and the dramas (real-life or otherwise), and strip away the cells, the Grandfather's Axes, the bonds of pure matter that stop the human brain understanding things in their entirety.

Miss Ruth sees *all* the angles, all the interpretations, and sees them all simultaneously. If she ever stepped outside the tower then she'd only see a fraction of the Truth, and through her own two eyes, assuming she actually *has* two.

The curtains snap open, Jacqueline pulling them apart with one swift, clean, robotic action. The TV noise floods out into the hallway at full volume, and the flickering monochrome light makes Inangela and Horror squint and then not-squint, squint and then not-squint, in rapid succession.

Lo! Enter the presence of the Great Mother!

2.04 Valentine was Born in the City of the Future

Meaning, he was born in a *model* of the City of the Future. This is how the story's told:

Twenty-two years ago there was a travelling exhibition which toured the country promising to give children a glimpse of the World of Tomorrow, because children are impatient and can't wait that long. There were props, and lots of them. There were gadgets the size of rocket engines which, the organisers assured the slack-jawed and nose-picking audience, would one day be cheaper and available to the general public. There were "artist's representations" of the technology children might expect to use when they got older, a prospect which many of them found exciting, not realising the "older" part would take the excitement away.

The exhibition was sponsored by a leading snackfood company, which is to say that for a most part the exhibition was an advert for that company, and the interactive monitor-screens showed rocket-age remixes of the company's television campaigns (behold, racoons in space!). Ad-men and people-conditioners were more obvious in those days. The centrepiece was the truly enormous City of the Future exhibit, made up of model buildings created by children from all over the nation, each one of whom received a special commemorative chocolate coin. The twist was that to receive this short-lived prize they had to build every structure in company colours, including gold, gold being the colour of the foil wrapper on the company's leading

product.

It was, as you may have guessed, in the hall of the City of the Future that Valentine's mother began to suffer the contractions. She could so easily have lain down on the floor, while the exhibition attendants hurried to seal off the area, but some bright spark must have seen too many hospital dramas (in which pregnant women *always* recline on furnishings just below eye-level) and started clearing a space on the great war-room-style table that supported the City. At first the golden skyscrapers and minarets and catwalks were moved quite carefully, so as not to disturb the urban planning of the Future, but as Valentine's mother began to howl louder and louder the structures were swept away by the armful. Once she was enthroned in the middle of the City, and the waters broke and her body started to buckle, the future-carnage got worse. The first thing Valentine must have seen was a wasteland in tin-foil. Poor kid. Born into destruction, and more importantly, into a world of advertising.

2.05 N.B.

This is how the story's told, but you'd have to agree that certain details are suspect. For one thing, it's a description of a pregnancy which leaves the mother completely oblivious until mere minutes before the child makes its debut, which is a *hell* of a short labour and Valentine's assertion that he was "premature" doesn't help. You might also ask why his mother was present at the exhibition anyway, since it was aimed at the 7—12 demographic and Valentine was an only child. But this is the way the story was told to him, and this is the way he tells it, and nativity legends are always awkward.

2.06 Familiarity

It's no good. It doesn't matter what kind of protective casing's involved. If somebody puts any quantity of nuclear material in front of you, you're going to want to back away, to push yourself as far into your seat as you can go. The human fear of poison is as deep-rooted as fear ever gets. You could argue that only people of the Black Man's creed, seeing the world in all its snake-bitten glory, know how to exploit that.

The bright yellow Red Uranium container is still resting on the floor of the car, between the Man's couch and Valentine's. Each slow, slow thump of the sound system shakes it and makes the metal cap vibrate, so every two seconds (the time between each thump of the bass, by Valentine's reckoning, but admittedly time is now slowing down for

him and the lizard-smoke doesn't help) there's a moment of blissfully pure terror as Valentine waits for the canister to tear itself open. The Black Man keeps smiling, not twitching a muscle, and by now Valentine's absolutely convinced that he's enjoying this. He's certainly in no hurry to conclude the business transaction.

No. It's no good. Valentine has to speak, just to let *something* out of his body.

'Is that… secure?' he asks, pointing at the canister, but only very briefly in case it makes his finger drop off. He tries to make the question sound concerned and professional, as if he were an expert on these matters.

'It'ssecure,' says the Black Man.

'You're sure? Only… some of these materials, they, ahh… it could be unstable.'

'Youwanna make sure?'

No, I don't want to go anywhere near the fucking thing.

'What do you mean, make sure?'

'You could look.'

Yes, he really should have seen that coming.

'It's not safe,' Valentine says. 'Not in these, these conditions. Not here.' He's fairly sure that the Man knows this, because even *he* knows it.

'You're gonnabe using it,' the Black Man says, and if he were a normal human being then he'd shrug nonchalantly at this point. 'Thought you mightwanna get to know it. Make sure it's what youwant.'

"Get to know it"? The Man's talking as if it's a person. No, wait… Valentine isn't sure about this, but isn't that the way the witch-cults talk about elements and substances and whatever-you-call-them? Like they've got personalities of their own, like every element's a definite *presence*?

God. Getting to know uranium. Suddenly Valentine can't help thinking of his destiny as a kind of appalling arranged marriage. He starts shaking his head.

'You need special clothes,' he says. (This much is true.) 'There's radiation…'

'Gotyourambulanceclothes.'

'What?'

'Got. Your. Ambulanceclothes.'

Valentine's head just can't stop shaking. He tugs at the hem of his overalls, proving how flimsy they are. 'No, this isn't enough. This won't help. Not if there's radiation.'

This time, the Black Man doesn't reply. He just keeps staring through those half-closed eyes.

'Really,' Valentine adds.

2.07 The Non-Space

'Whoo,' says Horror, eventually. Inangela imagines her blinking like one of the van's broken indicator lights, trying to get her eyes into the rhythm of this place, but it's never going to happen.

There's a kind of light you can only get from old movie footage. No, specifically: there's a kind of light you can only get from the combination of old movie footage and videotape. Black-and-white images shine onto the screen at twenty-four frames per second, badly-spliced and riddled with great black holes, with the contrast so badly out of whack that whole swathes of the picture are taken up by total black or blinding white. The videotape onto which the film's been transcribed skips ahead at twenty-*five* frames every second, creating dark, split-second gulfs in the stream of images, blanking out the light whenever it can't quite get a grip on the holes in the original film stock.

No strobe light, no deliberately-designed kind of flicker, could match this. Yet this is the way Miss Ruth's inner sanctum, her boudoir, is decorated. Flicker is its natural colour. There are no walls, in the sense that anyone would conventionally recognise them. There's just the light, generated by a screen so large and so intense that it renders everything else—everything made in the Pit—utterly intangible. This room is made of light, and the light goes on forever, except when everything turns to darkness and there's simply no room at all. The noise is overwhelming, the amplified TV-dialogue sound of a man arguing with a woman, the voices exceeding the limits of bass and treble and turning into shrill, painful fuzz.

It's just a room. And you'd never find your way out of it without the help of Jacqueline, who seems to teleport from space to space on Miss Ruth's command, but once again it could be your eyes moving faster than your brain can follow. Inangela is sure that this room must have burned Miss Ruth's eyes out by now, if (as it seems) she lives, eats and sleeps here. If, indeed, she has to do things as banal as eating and sleeping and hasn't already let the screen-light burn away her more garish biological functions. If she's blind, and her eyes have been

slowly worn down to nothing in their sockets, then Inangela knows it hardly matters. The light must rush into the woman's head through whatever empty holes she may have in her skull.

2.08 Shhhh

Inangela has already tried to start a conversation with Miss Ruth. The voice that came out of the flicker, that superimposed itself over the broken, scratchy old soundtrack like a subtitle, was loaded with ice and irony and a kind of authority which never even considers the thought that it might be questioned.

The voice said: '*As you obviously haven't noticed, I'm watching television.*'

2.09 Down to Earth

Contrary to the beliefs of many, the aim of any Executive is not to produce gods. Celebrities must at all costs be protected from the public, in order to ensure their bodies aren't damaged before such a thing might be beneficial. But it doesn't benefit anybody if the modern star becomes untouchable. The male consumer must feel *disappointed* (plus potentially excited) if told that a sexually-primed female star is a lesbian, as if it makes the slightest bit of difference to him. Ideally, the public should believe in Heaven-on-Earth and see the pop personality as being a liason with it. The word "idol" is *almost* aptly-chosen, but not quite. It suggests an aspect of a god rather than a god in itself, which is perfectly correct. It also suggests something static and unresponsive, something carved out of stone, which is quite wrong.

Older mythologies hold (or held) that the gods would occasionally take on human or animal form, descending to Earth in order to experience brief, bloody flashes of human experience. Urban European mythology held that even Emperors and Kings occasionally did this, disguising themselves as beggars or cripples in order to see the everyday meanness and delight of their subjects. Obviously ridiculous. Emperors aren't democratic, and have no need to know the feelings of anyone but those closest to them. They have no reason to understand the mood of the culture-in-general, unlike more modern corporate entities, who have no need to know anything else.

But that's just it. These are the not-quite-gods. They make their will known through their interviews and video recordings, but there's always the possibility one of them might be found walking the streets. Ready to give her blessing to anyone who shows her kindness. Ready to leave her footsteps in the ordinary world.

‘I had that Tiffany Korta in the back of my cab, once.’

2.10 Ride

This is the first time that Tiffany has been aware of the existence of a taxi. She’s been *in* them before. Taxis are, typically, the things which take her from the airport to the hotel or from the hotel to the designer boutique. But before now the taxi has just been a buffer, a place where she has to wait—accompanied by at least two members of the Executive—before the next location arrives outside the window. Suddenly, on this particular night, she’s realised that the taxi might actually be a thing in itself. Not to mention the things she can see on the outside.

She had to ask the driver whether it was possible to get closer to the things outside, and he showed her how to open the window, letting the night into the vehicle as the glass nervously slid down into the metal. Air that made it hard to breathe, just for a moment. The smell of a European restaurant, with its name marked out in a scribble-signature of yellow light, supplying her with the suggestion of lumache and tortelloni and beds of olive oil. Blasts of sound, car engines and radio-waves and parties of sweating teenagers on a hot night.

Tiffany is going somewhere of her own accord.

There’s a newspaper on the seat next to her, a copy of the *Sun*, and although it’s not a paper she likes (for obvious reasons) it somehow gels with the garlic and oil that’s working its way into the leather-plastic seats. There’s a picture of her on the front page; the lettering promises she’ll find more of herself on page twelve.

Tiffany isn’t sure it’s worth opening the paper, and anyway, she’s not certain whether her uber-self will get bigger if *she* concentrates on her own image. It’s obvious, isn’t it, that she has other things on her mind? She might not understand the layout of this town, but she has her instincts and the vague memory of an address, and she knows where she’s got to be. What the next scene change is.

Let’s not say she’s breaking any rules by sneaking away like this. Tiffany can go where she wants, even if the Executive makes disapproving faces behind its disapproving masks. But the fewer people who see her tonight, the safer she’ll feel.

2.11 A Certain Professional Rivalry

Valentine has established three things. One: the yellow canister

contains half a critical mass of Red Uranium. Two: the other half isn't in the car, which seems reasonable, because nobody wants to drive around with enough nuclear material to risk Armageddon in a traffic accident.

Three: the Black Man *must* be testing him. Nobody, *nobody*, would be stupid enough to open the container in the back of a car—even a Limo—if they had any idea what was in it. And the Black Man must know, or why would he be selling it?

The Man's silent now, rooting himself in his couch again, waiting for Valentine to make the next move. More than once in the last few minutes, Valentine's had to remind himself that he really *is* here to buy Red Uranium for illegal purposes, and that he really *isn't* faking it, which is what his instincts are still telling him.

So he says:

'Where, ahh… where did it come from?'

Of course, there's no reply from behind the great white smile.

'We need to know the source,' Valentine lies. Almost as an apology.

'Youdon'task,' says the Man.

'Did it come from a Ship?'

Hah! The Man's face actually flickers, and not just because of the candlelight. Genuine puzzlement?

'A Ship of War,' Valentine explains.

Not such an unreasonable question. Though the technology of the Ships remains obscure, surely there must be nuclear power involved? Hard to imagine what these great, unseen behemoths run on if it's *not* nuclear power. Since Red Uranium seems to have shown up in a town like this only after the start of the War, it'd make sense for the material to have been collected from a War site. Or it'd almost make sense.

The Man goes as far as to turn his head, as if Valentine's no longer worth his attention. His eyes dreamily fix themselves on whatever might happen to be outside.

'War's not mybusiness,' he says.

It is now, thinks Valentine.

'You wantot*know* things, gotoMissRuth,' the Man continues. 'This is justbusiness.'

'Go to…?'

'Miss Ruth,' says the Man.

Valentine decides not to ask. "Miss Ruth" sounds like a brothel-

owner to him.

‘Just wanted to check,’ says Valentine, still trying to sound like a professional buyer. ‘It’s important that we know the, uh…’ Pedigree? No, that’s not the word. Oh, never mind. ‘…type. Of material. We… have to be sure.’

It’s now that the Black Man turns to look at him again, but this time it’s a real, *deliberate* kind of looking, not just a vague and drug-muddied gaze.

‘You really wanttobesure?’ he says.

Boommmmm-CHAT, qua-*boommmmm*-CHAT, says the sound system.

2.12 To Explain:

Valentine doesn’t know Miss Ruth, and Inangela’s never met the Black Man, so none of the characters moving into position across the face of the town can compare notes. But just for the record.

The Black Man and Miss Ruth have a complicated relationship. The two of them have, obviously, never met. Miss Ruth has never been known to leave her place of residence, while the Man can only exist at street level and, frankly, has no reason to drop in on a mad old woman (most people, for want of better evidence, think of her as being old) who never comes any closer to touching the *bizongu* than seeing the hidden ghosts in Japanese TV advertisements.

They seem to have so little in common, other than the fact that they’re both figures of fascination for the town’s sub-cultures and sub-sub-cultures and wannabe-sub-sub-cultures. Yet, strangely, they’ve heard of each other and occasionally even seem nettled by the other’s presence. The Black Man will hint, rather unnecessarily, that if she ever attracts *too* many potential customers off the streets then he’ll cut out her womb (a threat which gets right to the core of his own native ritual process, or at the very least tells you something about the way it’s seen by men). In turn, Miss Ruth will describe the Black Man as an animal wallowing in the Pit’s filth, which is admittedly what she says about almost everyone.

They have to be aware of each other. They’re the only local remnants of a tradition that’s as old as language: *literally* as old, to the very second. The fact that one of them only uses the signs of the witch-cults out of pragmatism, and that the other has no interest in any part of the past that isn’t recorded on magnetic tape, is of no consequence at all. Before the War, before Faction Paradox, they were here. Just where they’ve always been.

2.13 The Plural of “Medium” is “Media”

Miss Ruth is definitely seated. This can be considered her one concession to the purely corporeal, the fact that she presumably has an arse which needs to be frested somewhere.

Then again, her profile’s impossible to make out, even when her silhouette’s framed against the blazing white of the screen / room. One moving shadow on the screen, and the eye leaps to follow. The eye retains the image of that actor, or just a little of him, so when your attention turns back to Miss Ruth you find that all those tiny details have become superimposed. She looks like everybody who’s ever been captured on film, or on videotape. Her outline seems to endlessly shift and change, different with every flash and every focus, and even her seat of power is mutable. It may be a throne or a bar-stool. It depends on the context.

Oddly enough, Horror seems to quite like it here, which is the only reason she agrees to come to the tower block even though she has no need of oracular advice from anyone and can’t stand the hall-of-beetles. Inangela suspects the room gives her a buzz, which is doubly odd as it just freaks out every other human being who ever gets this far. Horror apparently doesn’t mind the feeling that she suddenly exists in a medium other than flesh. (Inangela may have a “problem” with the idea of totem-animals, as Horror has already suggested, but it’s easy to believe that by now Horror is a totem animal in her own right.)

As far as can be ascertained, Miss Ruth is seated with her back to Inangela. As the only fixed point in the sanctum she has a weight which defies mass. She’s a huge, fat, immobile Great Mother, the queen of all the insect-cassettes, bloated to bursting-point by the signals around her. Here at the core of the world, she’s *mater media*. There’s a rattling whenever she lifts a hand, or even turns her head a little, and Inangela imagines her covered in the same beetle-shell as the rest of the collection.

2.14 The Headless Zoo

Oh yes. Inangela’s problem, or problems, with totem-animals. On a gut level the idea seems so *sound*, and as a ritualist she shouldn’t find it hard to believe that somewhere, somehow, there might be an animal with her name on it. That somewhere, somehow, there’s a complex bundle of mobile DNA which is connected to her in a deeply

profound and moving way. Except for two things.

1. She can't explain *why* this should be true. Being a child of the post-*Planet-of-the-Apes* generation, she's always known people are animals too and certainly not the chosen ones of Heaven, so she can't rationally explain why a human being should be celestially linked to a deer when (for example) there's indicating a deer might be linked to a dung beetle or a dung beetle might be linked to a cuttlefish. (By the same token, werewolf movies don't make a lot of sense to her. Men can turn into wolves and it seems almost normal, but starlings never, ever turn into rabbits.)

2. Ah yes. Wolves. Without exception, everyone she knows who's claimed to have a totem animal has claimed to be linked to a creature they've never met. Pale boys from the inner cities claim to be wolves. Girls who live in high-rise tower-blocks claim to be eagles. People who spend most of their lives in open-plan offices and underground tunnels claim to share in the heritage of the Great Bear. A strange totem to have, an animal which would never, ever be able to exist in your home environment and which you've only ever seen as a blown-up image on a documentary channel.

Inangela continues to search for the animal with which she feels an unspoken bond. She briefly toyed with the idea that it might be a frozen chicken—since symbolically, to someone who lives in a production-line world, this isn't in any way the same animal as a *rea*l chicken—and it helps that most tribal societies don't hold grudges against people who eat their own totems. In fact, every now and then you'll find a tribe that positively encourages this bizarre form of self-cannibalism.

Which leads her to the possibility of totem animals that *only* exist as projections, as ideals. Cartoon totem animals. Totem animals which have no existence other than as part of a logo on a certain meat product in a certain supermarket.

'*Come, eat of our flesh*,' they seem to say. '*Consume us and become whole. And by the way… oink*.'

2.15 Ms. Kortez and the Mosquito

When *she* was too young to know better, Tiffany had a totem-animal, of a kind. Her totem-animal was a mosquito. It's an unusual choice, perhaps, but since Tiffany was raised in a city where mosquito-nests were an everyday sight it at least conforms to Inangela's "no posturing" and "relevant animals only" rules. As with Tiffany's later stage performances, there may even have been a

deliberate element of danger to it. The days when her ancestors died of mosquito-bites were long gone, but the bug still had a reputation. The way Tiffany's mother would run screaming when one of them would land on one of the woman's big, freckled arms and try to puncture the skin. (Since the start of the War, things have changed in Little Cuba. People can now die of malaria again, just like in the old times. It's what happens when the rules change.)

Tiffany never thought of the insect as a totem. She thought of it more as a kind of imaginary friend, although in *substance* it wasn't imaginary, only in the way that she connected up all the world's mosquitoes to make one single, benevolent guardian-animal. When a mosquito landed on her, and lovingly tried to nestle under her skin, it was *the* mosquito. Even if her mother squashed it out of existence, it still came back.

One mosquito, in the same way that in her eyes there's now one town, one hotel and one taxi. All mosquitoes are the same anyway, and she knows for a fact that an exact copy of something is the thing, so is that so unreasonable?

2.16 No Coverage

Tiffany asks the driver if he can turn the radio on, getting disappointed to discover there's no radio in this cab. The driver tells her they're nearly there anyway.

Normally, Tiffany's permanently exposed to a signal of some kind. In the company of Father Danzael or Mother Nod she'll have the television on in the background, with the sound turned down low to a murmur. She sleeps with the radio on, as she did when she was a child. But here in the taxi the only background noise is the noise of the town, and as it doesn't come down a wire she isn't sure whether she trusts it.

Things are getting ominous for Tiffany. Her destination's calling her, she knows that, but now she realises—for the first time, really—that she's going there alone. Which is a major step, for someone who doesn't feel she's got much of an identity left, at least not here in this little bundle of flesh and bone.

'This it?' asks the driver, and the vehicle pulls into the forecourt of the darkest place Tiffany's ever seen.

2.17 Boommm-CHAT, qua-boommm-CHAT...

…the music's faster than it was, although there didn't seem to be a point where one track ended and a new one started. The car is speeding up, too, Valentine's sure of it even if the only way he can judge is by watching the little yellow street-lights get faster as they skid past the windows. Ergo, his heartbeat's also faster. G-force pressing him into the seat. (Well, no, not really. His back's to the driver, so logically the acceleration should be pushing him *forward*, towards the nuclear materials container. But there's no way in God's name he's doing that.)

Faster music means the car shakes more. The cap of the container vibrates at least once a second. Valentine's trying not to stare at it, but staring at the Black Man staring at him is worse, and maybe it's the candle-smoke in his throat but he's sure he's going to be sick any second now.

'Said you needtobe sure,' says the smile in the seat opposite.

'What?' says Valentine.

'Said you needtobe sure,' the Man repeats. 'Don'twant you saying it's nogood. Don'twant you coming back asking for your *mullah*back.'

'I don't understand,' says Valentine. 'Look… it's not stable. Uranium isn't stable. That's the point, all right? You've got to go slower—'

'Youever used the stuff before?' the Man asks. He doesn't have to raise his voice to cut in.

'No,' says Valentine, as the car gets faster and he finds himself trying to become one with the animal-hide under him. 'Yes. No. I know what I'm doing.'

'It'snot so bad,' the Man tells him. 'You gottoknow how to treat it. That'sall.'

'It doesn't work like that,' says Valentine. 'It doesn't work like that. You can't "treat" it. You can't touch it. It's not stable. It's poison. Radiation. That's all.'

Even as he says it, he realises it's the wrong thing to say. He remembers a satellite TV documentary about snake-cults, about preachers who test their faith with a cobra in each hand, who've spent their lives finding salvation by letting the venom into their bodies one little speck at a time. He desperately tries to remember whether they have the same tradition in Africa.

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because the Man is leaning forward again, his bulk shifting, his arm reaching out, his face getting brighter as his cheek passes close to one of the candles. He's reaching for the container. *Oh, God*, he's going to do it. *Oh, God*, he's actually going to do it.

‘It’snotsobad,’ says the Black Man. ‘Look.’

‘Don’t *touch* it!’ Valentine finds himself saying.

The hand of the Black Man, gripping the cap of the container. The smile, hovering in the background. Valentine desperately wants to stop this, or be sick, or something, *anything* to be more than just a creature who exists in the gaps between the bass-beats. This isn’t how you get involved in the War, this has got nothing to do with statements or Faction Paradox or even (God help him) politics. This is living death in the back of a car. Those parts of his body controlled by Coz’s pills start to twitch, ready for action, but he doesn’t for the life of him know what action it might be and right now every option—grappling the Black Man, screaming, smashing one of the windows and trying to climb out into the non-poisonous air outside—seem equally ludicrous.

‘Youwanttobe sure?’ asks the Black Man, as he twists the cap and the *pfop* of the seal becomes part of the percussion track.

2.18 Politics

The relationship between the War and the more conventional, everyday powers is a complex one. Clearly no politician in the modern age can wholly avoid the subject of the War, especially since the majority of his or her potential supporters will have some degree of first-hand experience, even if that experience just involves witnessing the thunder-flash of a rocket attack in the far distance and thinking how close it was.

But at the same time, no policy on the War will ever do a politician any good. Politicians probably couldn’t do a thing about it even if they tried, even if every party became united in opposition to it and even if the complete financial resources of every continent were brought to bear. No government can control a conflict this fundamental, any more than they can control the weather or the economy or the production of weapons. Some forces are older and more deep-rooted than any constitution, which leaves the average candidate with an obvious problem. People don’t like the War, yet any politician who speaks against it will be judged a failure by definition. No promise he makes to curb it, or to keep it out of his particular province, can possibly be kept.

The standard solution is to be generally sympathetic to those affected by the War, but always to speak of it as if it’s sadly necessary, something which has always been built into the foundations of society (and who knows, maybe it has). It’s exactly the same approach that’s

favoured by the pop stars, and make what you will of that. A good politician knows that no voter will ever spend too long analysing the reasons for the War's existence, unless some enterprising journalist not only succeeds in uncovering the truth about the War's masters but also finds the "human angle" which will allow that truth to be accepted by the general public.

In the two years since the War came to this part of the world, no journalist has managed this feat. It seems increasingly likely that the forces responsible for the conflict have no relation to the rest of humanity at all, which makes the "human angle" impossible to find by definition.

2.19 The Moral Dimension

In the sanctum it's possible, just, to make out what Miss Ruth's actually "watching." However terrible the contrasts, however many all-devouring patches of black might open up in the videotape, human brains are good at linking together picture A and picture C even when picture B isn't there. As a result, Inangela can make out the shadows of characters as they go through the motions of their narratives. Sometimes they seem to be behind her, sometimes they seem to be in front of her, and sometimes they seem to be hiding behind the termite-mound stacks of tape. But they're there, and on the soundtrack they keep screaming.

She finds herself stepping forward to try to get a better look, and inadvertently steps on something on the floor. One of the tapes she knocked over earlier. It crunches like a bug underneath her, and instinctively she says 'eeurgh.'

On the screen, the man and the woman are fighting. This is odd, as they were fighting when Inangela first stepped into this boudoir and it ended with the man punching the woman through a window, both of them turning into bright smears of white at the moment of the murder. The first time round, this was followed by a badly-scarred shot of the man watching a television set as if nothing had happened. Now the same scene's replaying itself, only this time there's no comforting shot of the man watching TV after the woman plunges to her hazy, static-addled death.

'*The Twilight Zone*,' says Miss Ruth, wearily, her voice carrying perfectly on the swell of tortured string-music that sweeps across the scene. '1964.'

Surprisingly, it's Horror who responds to this. Occasionally Horror's pop-culture knowledge will surprise you. Occasionally she'll even

show an acute and inexplicable knowledge of stock markets and marketing strategies, especially when drunk.

'Is this the one with the TV set that can show the future?' asks Horror.

A-hah. That would explain it. Man gets precognitive television. Man sees himself kill wife. Man tries to avoid killing wife. Man and wife get into argument as a result. Man ends up killing wife exactly as predicted. Perfect self-fulfilling prophecy, bordering on the paradoxical. The Faction would be mildly entertained, possibly. Except that it…

'…doesn't seem very fair,' says Inangela.

'It isn't,' says the vast and disembodied and eminently upper-class voice of Miss Ruth. You can tell she's talking down her nose, as if she's appalled at the notion of having to explain something so simple. But at least it suggests that she's *got* a nose. 'No discipline. No sense of moral justice. Utter chaos.'

Meaning, Inangela supposes, that the writers were getting desperate for ideas and had run out of dramatic irony. But that explanation smacks of the Pit.

'Yeah,' says Horror, slowly. 'D'you… y'know… ever watch anything in colour?'

'In company?' says Miss Ruth, leaving Inangela in no doubt that a major breach in etiquette has been suggested. 'Do you have any *idea* how much discipline it requires to appreciate colour?'

Which Inangela takes to mean: If you saw the full horror in colour, here outside the Pit, then you'd go perfectly mad.

2.20 What's In the Box

The Black Man's hand is in the container.

How did he get to be this black?

The car is still accelerating, probably. The bass noise is still shaking against Valentine's ribcage and his pulse is still beyond abnormal, but even his pulse seems a far-away thing now. The container is open. Red Uranium is in the air.

How did he get to be this black? Does anybody know?

The Black Man's hand slides into the container, up to the knuckles, up to the wrist, up to the forearm, but Valentine has no way of judging how quickly the Man's moving. His time perception isn't what it should be and he has difficulty matching the movements to the

rhythm of the music. His eyes are watering. Does radiation make your eyes water, or does it just eat them away? Oh, he shouldn't have thought that—now he's seeing spots in front of his eyes.

You can see the nerves tightening along the length of the Black Man's arm, just under the cuffs of his elegant graverobber's jacket. *God, he's tightening his grip. He's holding it. Is he going to take it out? Please don't take it out.*

You can't see it, but you can imagine it. What strikes Valentine most is that there's no hiss. He was expecting a hiss, the sound of burning flesh as the Man grips the material in the container and lets it torch its chemical name into his skin.

There's no hiss. There doesn't need to be. The reputation of Red Uranium does all the work. It's silent, it's invisible, and it may well be eating its way into Valentine's cells at this very moment. He's half-aware of the smile hovering nearby, the rare smell of something like dried leaves on the Man's breath, but more importantly

How did he get to be this black? Has he done this before? Is the Red Uranium inside him already, burning his tissue from the inside? Has he really made a deal with it, bizongu-style, and if so then is he one of the walking dead already?

2.21 Breathe

Now the Man's pulling that hand out of the container, and only now —now he really, really needs to gasp—does Valentine realise he hasn't been breathing for some time. The moment of panic passes when the hand comes out of the container empty, leaving the uranium inside. Which is at least something. What he feels now can't accurately be called relief, but even so the blood starts to relax in his bloodstream and his head starts to swim in a way that's not wholly unpleasant.

The Man leans back into his seat, flexing his empty right hand. He stretches one leg as he reclines, and almost by accident his foot pushes the canister forward, making it scrape across the floor of the car. It moves one inch towards Valentine. Valentine, already pressed into the animal-hide couch, is incapable of moving one inch back.

'Youtry,' says the Black Man.

2.22 The Waiting Room, Again

The mannequin-woman is approaching across the lush white carpet, her hips bobbing from side to side under her tight skirt, so precisely that even Tiffany (whose hips are renowned for this sort of thing) has

difficulty believing the precision. She's seen women in this kind of costume before, prim and self-sculpted and usually standing at the doors of almost-fetish clubs, but they're all faking it. The mannequin-woman is frightening by comparison.

She's bringing over a tray of food. It's something Tiffany finds reassuring, especially considering the taxi ride here. She could almost believe that the pasta-trail in the streets was leading her here, to this waiting-room with its black drapes and sofas and its pleasing, far-away TV sounds. Of course, she can't help feeling that the instinct which brought her here goes much deeper. She wonders whether one of her imaginary doppelgangers once came here, and somehow the information's ended up leaking into *this* version of herself.

The mannequin-woman doesn't even make eye-contact as she offers one of the little black bowls to Tiffany, full of farfalle and tomato-shrapnel in its slick, smooth oil. Tiffany does her special "grateful" smile, though it might well be out of place here.

'Um, I was just wondering,' she says. 'Will I… will I be waiting long?'

'Not long,' says the woman, who is, Tiffany's sure, some kind of CGI image or something. Then she turns and bobbles away, like a skittle with joints.

So Tiffany tries a forkful of the food. It's cool and it's rich and there's the slight hind-scent of sliced pepper, and whatever's in the tomato makes it seem sweet at the same time, so it takes a while to realise that there's something bitter in it: not even an aftertaste, more like something sharp and deliberate. A knife in the dark.

The mannequin *did* ask her whether she wanted… what was it? Some kind of sauce. Tiffany said 'yes' just as a guess. She screws up her face, and looks up to see the woman about to vanish between two of the curtains.

'It's, uh, kind of sour,' she says.

'It doesn't come from the Pit,' the mannequin informs her, as the mechanical backside disappears from view.

Tiffany is sure she should give a one-word response to this. But she can't choose between 'oh,' 'right' or 'uh-huh.'

She takes another bite of the food.

2.23 I Am John's One True Self

It's a simple, direct demonstration, which is why Tiffany finds it so easy to remember. It's the way the facts of life were taught to her by

the Executive, but note the way it's phrased. *They say that it in the course of seven years, every cell of flesh and blood and gristle and brain in your body gets replaced. One cell dies out, ready for a new cell to slip into exactly the same position.*

Flesh and blood and gristle and brain. Nothing about bone.

Bone knows how to stay. Once your other cells have dropped away and your body's stopped replacing itself with ingenious copies, the chances are that your bones will still be there. They can last for millions of years, your bones. So what does it mean? The fact that alone of all your parts, your skeleton is the one thing which remains loyal?

Does it mean that you *are* your skeleton? Everything else is so temporary. If you want to believe there's a "real" you, then believe that it's tough, mindless and as bright as calcium. Imagine the argument, for example, between Valentine's brain and his bones. 'Get out of the car *now*,' says the brain. 'We're going to die.'

'Hmph,' says the bone. 'Well, I'm a lot less bothered by radiation poisoning than *you* seem to be, so I think we'll be staying.'

What marks out the "real" Faction Paradox, according to popular lore? Answer: its masks are real bone, bone from something old and impossible. The public knows the bone can't lie, that it isn't transient like so many other fashions. The real Faction Paradox, if it were to exist, would make a claim to the title not because of its knowledge (which changes over time, just like we all do) or its membership (doubly so) but because of its masks. Its irreplaceable masks.

There used to be cultures that used bones as weapons. The pointing-bones of the Australian Aboriginals, aimed like a gun to cause brain-death in any victim capable of understanding. Or certain Polynesian tribes, who knew something of the nature of time even before the learned gentlemen of the west, and—just like the Faction—made that direct link between the bones of the past and the past itself.

By the way, Valentine's bones are winning the argument. He's staying put.

2.24 Oh, and...

…and the shocking truth about Inangela's Faction Paradox mask is this—she bought it from a shop called *Temptation*, which just happens to be a street or two away from the square where the rocket attack hit home. Assuming it's still there, *Temptation* is a shop that sells fetishwear. It makes a big thing out of being a post-modern post-feminist sex shop, which means that every single item it sells walks a

fine line between pornography and sarcasm. Faction Paradox masks aren't technically erotica, at least not *yet*, but there's obviously enough fetishism there for it to qualify.

There were two other girls in the shop when Inangela bought the mask, both of them clearly seventeen and under the impression they'd entered forbidden territory (several hundred years earlier they would've proved themselves by getting pierced, but now *looking* at the piercings is enough). One of the girls was immensely fat, and had squeezed her huge, rubbery body into a tiny rubbery dress, while her pale, skinny friend looked on and pretended to be embarrassed. And of course, the girl couldn't resist it. Standing there in front of the shop's only mirror, she scooped a Faction mask off the rack and tried it on, giggling all the time.

She looked like an animal, like something leathery, well-fed and huge-eyed, balancing on a pair of high-heeled black hooves. Just for a moment, Inangela got a glimpse of what she might look like, or what she would have looked like if she weren't so impeccably well-turned-out. A hybrid animal-woman, overfed and over-cultured.

By that time, however, she'd already paid for her own mask and there was no turning back.

There's no sexual fetish for Faction Paradox, or for ersatz voodoo-faced animal-people. But there will be. Girls with their spectacular hooves will stalk the streets of the towns, and boys on the edge of puberty will see them, and be curious, and never forget that sense of hormonal, animal curiosity. And then they'll grow up, and they won't be able to remember the sensation of being young and feeling the whiplash of puberty without remembering that every mystery animal, every beautiful and exotic creature they ever knew, used to hide behind a big-eyed, snouted skull.

2.25 Tribute

It's hard to resist taking a step forward towards Miss Ruth, even if you know that it's not in any way necessary. If you've got something to give her, Jacqueline will magically teleport it from your hand to her patron's throne. The Pit's habits die hard, though. So when Inangela puts her hand into the lining of her skirt, and removes the naked, unmarked videocassette that's been nesting there ever since she took off her coat, she automatically stumbles forward to offer it up to the Great Mother. Offering the tribute for the oracle's inspection.

Nobody has ever successfully worked out what Miss Ruth considers a "good" sacrifice and what she considers a "bad" one. No reliable

report has ever described her rejecting an offer of raw videotape (though urban lore no doubt insists that a terrible fate has befallen those who've attempted to offer her DVDs), but in the past she must have been presented with everything from home movies to feature films straight off the "remaindered" shelves. She keeps her own opinions.

Inangela presents Miss Ruth with a videotape recording made from Inangela's own (not wholly legal) satellite feed. It started out as a recording of the memorial service for a dead general, taped by mistake from a rolling news channel, but a transmission from a pirate station cut in halfway through and started overlaying it with Brazilian fetish-porn, filling most of the screen with quivering waves of yellow-skinned, badly-tuned flesh. Which is entertaining only because by sheer fluke, the soundtrack—the regular, rhythmic sounding of the cannon as the general receives his last salute—still appears to be in perfect synch with the imagery. One boom for every four thrusts.

You could easily fake something like this. But that's not the point. This strange marriage of the pornographic and the funerary was a rare and natural event, and the chances are it'll never happen again in the entire history of human culture. Inangela doesn't expect Miss Ruth to care about either porn or dead generals any more than *she* does, but she feels that the mother-of-all-broadcast-media will at least understand its unique nature. It's said that many of the tapes in Miss Ruth's collection are identical to the casual observer, that in some sections there are ten or eleven or fifty-six cassettes which all contain exactly the same programme, but recorded at different times or just in different parts of the world. Only Miss Ruth sees the difference. This is, clearly, a woman who appreciates context.

And it's not as if Inangela really has to make an impression with this "gift." She's not after any favours here. The offering's a mere courtesy, since it's rude to come to the tower empty-handed.

2.26 Hm

'There's something you should know,' Inangela announces, and the sound from Miss Ruth's viewing-chair might possibly be a sigh.

'Yeeeeees?' says Miss Ruth, somewhat wearily.

'We're doing a ritual,' Inangela explains. Realising how weak it sounds even as she says it.

'*She's* doing a ritual,' adds Horror.

'A ritual,' repeats Miss Ruth, dryly, although she stops short of saying "how nice for you." Evidently this news from the Pit is of no

importance to her at all.

Inangela nods. ‘To, ehh… to wake it up. The town. To wake up the town. I thought… we should tell you.’

‘And of course, it’s only *you* who’s doing this,’ says Miss Ruth, her voice so nasal that it gets right inside Inangela’s own sinuses. ‘*You* decided that this… “town”… needs waking. You’re not a part of this society you’re so intent on rousing.’

The word “town” sounds as if it’s completely alien to Miss Ruth, even taking the sarcasm into account. Unlike Inangela, Miss Ruth really *can* make a claim to be beyond this society.

‘Well… yes?’ is the best that Inangela can manage.

‘And you’re certain, I suppose, that you’re the important one in this ritual?’

‘*Someone’s* got to be,’ Inangela retorts.

‘Hm,’ says Miss Ruth.

Suddenly Inangela becomes aware of Jacqueline, standing right at her side again, bound up in the apprentice’s uniform with its dagger-blade high-heels planted squarely in the floor. Given the flicker, Jacqueline looks for all the world like a maid from a *What the Butler Saw* movie. As retro as it gets.

‘What Miss Ruth means is, she appreciates the warning,’ says Jacqueline.

2.27 The Process

The mouth of the container is a great black poisonous hole, so forgive Valentine if he can’t take his eyes off it. From here on the couch, with his spine forced into the upholstery, he might possibly be able to see the material inside *if* he leaned forward and *if* the lighting happened to be better. But the car’s moving faster, and faster, and faster still, so even Valentine—distracted as he is by imminent radiation poisoning—has to wonder where in the town you can find a road so long and so free of any other traffic.

‘Youwantto use it,’ says the Black Man. ‘Thenuse it.’

Valentine tries to shake his head. No, he imagines himself saying, no, you’re a scary witch-doctor-man and not a scientist and you don’t understand. I need a special suit. I need special gloves.

‘You don’t needanything,’ the Man tells him. Telepathy? No: easy guess. ‘You just gottoknow it. Got to *introduce* yourself.’

He laughs, then. His vocal cords sound like they’ve been scraped by

razors. Is that a side-effect of the radiation too?

'Can't,' says Valentine. Thinking… is this a game of Russian roulette? Does the radiation only kill you 50% of the time?

But the Black Man just stares at him. And smiles, of course. Don't forget that.

'Can't *do* it,' Valentine explains, but his voice gets swept up in the *thomm* of the sound system, and let's be honest it's not a great explanation anyway.

'Saidyouhad things to do,' says the Black Man. 'Can't have much that needsdoing, if you can't even gettoknow it.'

What's Valentine going to do? Back out now that he's come this far? Tell his "partners" that he folded at the last minute? Kick down the door and jump out of the Black Carriage as it tears along this infinitely long stretch of roadway? No. Even if those are, technically, the most reasonable options. Certainly more reasonable than putting your hand into a tube of uranium. He's part of a process now.

His hand pauses, though, when it reaches the lip of the container. It's giving him time to think, not to turn back but to realise what's happening to him. Time, too, to look up from the pale, night-person skin of his arm and stare the Black Man right in the face. If not precisely in the eye.

But the Black Man barely has a face at all. Just a smile that never goes away, and occasional scars of yellow as the street-light flashes across his face and illuminates his features one angle at a time.

The bass rolls like thunder.

Every *bizongu* in Africa speaks through the hi-hat.

Valentine spreads the fingers of his hand, and lets his fingers slide over the lip of the container, and

2.28 —

the car slams to a halt. Valentine, hunched over the canister, is thrown back against the couch with his neck almost snapping on the bone of the headrest. Given that he's already half-expecting a big bang, or a nuclear shock (is there such a thing as a nuclear shock?) from the RU-235, the impact's enough to give a near-death experience to every sense he has. The shock makes its way down his spine, lighting up most of the nerves on its way and setting fire to the tiny little fragments of Coz-drugs that are still clogging up his bloodstream.

You could almost believe that the Black Man timed this. And to perfection.

Valentine spends a moment or two blinking away the dots in his eyes, and a moment or two more staring at the Man, before he thinks to look down at the floor.

The Red Uranium container is on its side. It's rolling to and fro while the floor shudders underneath it, but you can tell there's something heavy inside because it never rolls too far to the right or to the left. Valentine tries to feel something at this point—even just the prickle-skin of oncoming cancer—but he feels nothing. Lying on its side, the container looks like a wounded animal. No, like a dead shark. A fish out of water. Its big black mouth gapes helplessly at Valentine's feet, trying to look threatening but lacking most of its dignity.

'See?' says the Black Man. 'It'snotsobad.'

Valentine looks up, and out of the window. There are lights out there, ordinary-looking street-lights, although the glass is too dark to make out much more.

'Where are we?' he asks. Not unreasonably.

The Black Man doesn't answer. Valentine watches him out of the corner of one eye, just to make sure he isn't making any important hand-gestures. He's not.

'Are we still in town?' Valentine tries.

2.29 The Land of the Dead

Imagine this as a single image, with an open car door as its frame. Imagine it as a painting, or better yet, a TV picture—one discretely-framed moment from the life of the outside world.

It's an archway. Or an overpass. That's more like it: the underside of an overpass. Somewhere up ahead there's a grey concrete wall, marked with generations of graffiti too in-bred and too obscure to mean much. There are two great, monolithic concrete columns holding up the arch between the car and the wall, supporting the road that must surely run overhead, but there's no traffic noise from up above (yes, this image has its own soundtrack) or on the road that runs through the archway.

Why no traffic? Are cars afraid to come here? Perhaps they're afraid of the things that live under the overpass, the things that lurk under the bridge. They're here now. There must be seven of them, some standing close by the car, some lounging against the concrete pillars, some camouflaged against the black-paint graffiti patterns. The street-lamps give you enough light to let you count them, but not to give

them faces.

All of them dress in the clothes of the young and the predatory, jackets with hoods and designer names scratched across their chests, caps that hide their eyes, shoes made for running and proving you've got the will to run. Some things aren't so conventional, though. Their hair's too long, too carefully-styled to make them look altogether modern. There are braids and beads. There's pieces of jewellery which, in most towns, would never be worn by anything male (and here they're all male).

And all of them turn to face us, all of them turn to look towards the car door as it opens. There's no movement, apart from the turning of their heads. There's no facial expression any more than there are individual faces. All of them are Black, just like the Man himself, a Black that's got at least as much to do with allegiance as with race. Because you can only get here if you know the *bizongu*. You can only get this far if you've reached out to touch the primal poison.

See: there's something on the ground between them. Did you think they were just standing around? Look more closely. They're standing around *something*, something that's etched onto the paving-slabs almost at the dead-centre of the tableaux. They're looking as if we've disturbed them, as if this isn't meant for our eyes.

The pattern on the ground is an outline, drawn in chalk. Human in shape. The same white line that's traditionally drawn around the body at a murder scene, except that this one seems… more stylised. The arms and legs are severed from the body, each limb a discreet, self-enclosed shape.

It's the mark of the dead, which seems apt. These people, gathered together under the bridge—are *they* the dead, too? Easy to imagine that they've touched one of the *bizongu*, one of the "hot spirits," in radioactive form or otherwise. Everything that's said here is said on the walls, not on their faces. Did they touch something truly poisonous, to make their eyes so invisible and their lives so silent?

This is the Land of the Dead. Where all the Black Carriages go.

The door closes, and as it closes the dead men lose interest. The last thing we see, as the tinted windows shut out the light, is the seven figures turning their heads away from us again.

2.30 Next

There's someone else in the waiting-room when Inangela and Horror are led back through it, folded up on one of the plush, padded, reassuring sofas right next to Inangela's coat.

The girl looks about twenty, probably quite pretty but thin and messed-up-looking, big eyes surrounded by sweat and mascara. Arms wrapped round her knees, staring up at Inangela as if she's waiting for someone to attack her. She looks like the kind of girl who isn't dedicated enough to become a prostitute, and has sex with men just to get lifts home. Inangela wonders whether the girl's been given a bad tip and thinks Miss Ruth's some kind of drug dealer.

When they reach the lift, Horror leans over to Inangela and mutters something. She mutters it through gritted teeth, as if that'd be enough to stop anyone else hearing it. What she mutters is this:

'That looks just like Tiffany Korta.'

Horror says it at the very instant the lift doors start to close, giving Inangela just enough time to glance over her shoulder at the girl with the sweat-soaked hair and the leather pants who's the next in line to see Miss Ruth.

However, Inangela utterly fails to do this. Instead, she just says:

'Don't be stupid, Hor.'

The lift doors close. Going down.

2.31 The Truth About Foxy

At this precise moment in time, the *Sun*'s all-purpose showbusiness correspondent, columnist and bear-baiter Gareth "Foxy" Taylor is in a bar sixteen corners away from Chemikaze Lane. The bar's technically closed for the night, but Foxy (because he likes to pretend the world knows him as "Foxy," claiming that people cheerfully address him as such in the street every day) knows someone who knows the owner. He's not only finishing his drink, he's also finishing a cold orecchiette-and-feta-cheese takeaway from a plastic carton, and he's reading other people's columns in other people's newspapers while he eats. This is how the world should best remember him: newsprint and the lingering smell of garlic. He's already written his piece on the second Tiffany Korta performance. Actually he wrote it before the performance, which he didn't bother to attend, and—

—no, wait.

See how he's painted here, in grease-grey and takeaway-yellow. He's a sneering, leering hack who makes opinions without knowing any of the facts. Let's keep one thing in mind, though. He makes his assumptions days in advance, but nineteen times out of twenty he turns out to be right and the other one time out of twenty he's not really interested. This is a complex society. The culture-in-general

would rip out every little cell in our brains if we couldn't assume, generalise and pigeonhole. We can't afford to know all the details.

See this man, Gareth "Foxy" Taylor. This chubby, gargoyle-mouthed, bristle-faced creature of the night. We have a perfect right to hate him, but only in the same way that he has a perfect right to hate Tiffany, or any other over-hyped prima donna who ponces across his television screen. We have a right to hate him not because he's ugly, loud-mouthed and bigoted (he has a neat line in attacking anyone slightly more liberal than Oswald Mosely, because he knows full well it'll get him invited onto TV shows as a "controversial media pundit," and Christ, he gets paid). No. We have a right to hate him because he's *banal*.

He's already thinking about the day-after-tomorrow's news. He doesn't know that before all the night's rituals are done, something will happen which will make his column on the size of Tiffany's calves almost unpublishable. What would you like to bet he'll be there when it happens? Odds on him living through it, anyone?

2.32 Valentine's Question was Never Really Answered

Are we still in town?, he asked. But that was before the Black Man opened the car door and showed him the world outside.

The scene under the overpass, with the dead men and the chalk line on the pavement, didn't seem familiar. Which is to say, it wasn't a part of town Valentine knows. But even on the nightshift, he hasn't visited every part of town. Nevertheless, he finds himself thinking of the not-quite-true and not-quite-false answer he gave the Black Man, when the Man wanted to know whether he was planning on using the Red Uranium inside town limits. *It's not going to be used anywhere like this.*

The Land of the Dead wasn't anywhere like anywhere else, either. That sense, that creeping thought: *You can only get to that place if you've touched the "hot" spirits.* Maybe it intersects the town in a way that's impossible to chart on an ordinary A-Z, just like the War itself or one of Valentine's all-important Ships of War.

Right now the Black Carriage is on the road again, the street-lights sliding past the windows, the music settling down to a constant, lazy pulse. The Black Man is taking him home. The Red Uranium container, with its cap now fixed in position, lounges on the seat by his side. No longer a threat.

‘You said there’s only half in there,’ Valentine says, not taking his eyes off the window. He’s surprised how flat and disinterested his voice sounds. Maybe Coz’s pills are blissing him out a little. Maybe it’s the background radiation, who can say?

‘Uh-huh,’ the Black Man confirms.

‘Where’s the other half?’

‘Wheredoyou live?’

Valentine glances at the Man, but he hasn’t moved a muscle, so he turns back to the window. The Man’s smile has now become the smile of a narcotics dealer who’s telling a new client, “See how good it feels?”

‘Why do you want to know where I live?’ he asks.

‘We deliver,’ says the Black Man. His idea of a joke.

Valentine shakes his head. ‘No. I don’t want… I don’t *need* it there. I need to get back to the ambulance.’

‘Ohhh. You’re gonnadowhat you do in the ambulance, hah?’

Valentine shrugs. He knows the Man isn’t expecting a proper answer. ‘There’s something I need there,’ he says.

(And who knows? By now the girl in the mask might be one of the dead, too.)

‘What you like,’ says the Black Man.

‘So the other half…?’

‘We’ll getiittoyou.’ Oh, if the smile could get bigger, then it would. ‘Youcan trust me. Brother.’

2.33 How the World Sees It

What does a Ship look like? No, that’s a dead-end question, like asking what real angels look like or what colour Thursday is (*everybody* secretly knows that the days of the week are colour-coded… for now we’ll take it as read that in this town, Thursday is generally considered to be yellow). With the Ships of the War, the question’s doubly difficult since the vast majority of people don’t believe in them any more than they believe in the Straw That Broke the Camel’s Back or the Cat Who Got the Cream.

If asked, most people would probably draw something like a jet fighter. It has to be sleek, because it’s built by the noble engineers of the War-time powers, and it has to be black because anything else would lose the air of invisibility. A black triangle, flat and fast-moving —something shark-like, in fact, incapable of stopping. Those

particularly imaginative types, who put great store in the Shipbuilder's technical abilities, might tend to run with the "shark" feel but go for something more organic. A craft that's vast, cool and unsympathetic, a grand predator in every conceivable way. Such a Ship would have veins full of nuclear tissue and a hundred fusion-bright, rocket-loaded eyes, with its wings sweeping back and curving in on themselves in arcs a mile long. Turning its rear section into something sharp and self-enclosed, like the beak on a giant squid. A Ship like that doesn't care about invisibility. It knows it can go where it pleases, and any witnesses will simply be burned off the skin of the world. Those who catch sight of this monstrosity burst into flames without explanation and evaporate into the air, never leaving any footprints behind.

2.34 How Valentine Sees It

Valentine thinks he knows better. Valentine understands that if those who run the War are honestly capable of fighting battles which extend into the future, and if their technology does indeed involve *time* in some way, then the ships can't possibly just be flying gunboats or military transporters with their own will to exist. The Ships must logically be extensions of history itself, living footnotes in the textbook of the War. He imagines them as structures extending through time, intersecting towns like this one in ways that poor dumb parochials (War slang for "civilians"?) can't quite grasp.

But human beings aren't made to think in abstracts. Though he might willingly explain this concept to anyone who asks, it's not what he *really* believes. Note the way he thinks of a Ship as a "living" footnote. Whenever he says the word "Ship" he sees one in his head—huge, slippery and murderous, every bit as organic as those who subscribe to the "shark" model. This being a beast of the imagination, it'll never fit into his head all at once and he'll never get it down on paper any more than you can describe the *real* horror of a genuine nightmare or of sleep paralysis.

So what if it's supposed to be made of history? Valentine imagines its roots and feelers planting themselves in the ground, even though he knows better. He imagines a once-human pilot in its control section, so heavily wired into the machine-systems that he or she becomes almost insect-like, sealed inside a carapace of black armour and linked to the control mechanisms by cables and caterpillar-wires. Being human, Valentine's been raised to think in terms of space, not theory. While Inangela maps out her ritual and Tiffany tries to map out the culture-in-general, Valentine puts together his map of the

thing that's buried under the earth, wondering where (*where!*) its branches might lead him and where (where!) it might sprout from the ground next.

2.35 The Hall, Again

Horror may fucking hate this place, but for Tiffany it goes a long, long way beyond that. The hallway connects the waiting room to the place where, if she understands this correctly, she'll meet Miss Ruth. This much makes sense—she may be on foot, but it's much like waiting for a taxi to get her to a new scene.

What she *doesn't* understand is how this place, this in-between place, can be such an atrocity. It horrifies her. The real problem isn't the spectacle of the hundred-thousand chitinous, black-shell cassettes, or the stone things with blunt, chipped-away faces that guard them, or the way the room seems to lurch in time to the distant, distorted and no-longer-reassuring TV noise from the far end. The real problem is that this in-between place is such a terrible place in *itself*. For one of the famous and teleported like Tiffany, this is a new and profound kind of horror.

For the first time in recent memory she feels expectation. She realises, with a terrible, fast-building dread, that what's waiting for her at the far end of this hallway must be even worse.

And it occurs to her, then, that perhaps she's never going to get anywhere. That now she's started moving of her own volition, without the Executive to guide her, she'll never be at a set location ever again. She may find herself travelling forever, through places that get worse and worse with the pulling-back of every curtain. All of a sudden this all-too-sensitive, just-about-educated girl, who's never known any anxiety more serious than the width of her hips, knows *infinity*.

She's trying to get the mannequin-automaton-woman to stop moving, because she can't stop following that bobbing, mechanically-precise body, even though her legs are buckling under her and she's lurching towards one of the sets of bookcases. She knows she can only stop if the mannequin stops, but the woman doesn't even look back at her, and the jagged edges of the hard, black cassettes loom out of the shelves as she stumbles toward them. She realises there was probably something in the food she was given, the thing that cut across her tongue.

'Stop,' says Tiffany Kortez-cum-Korta, as she veers away from the tapes and finds herself lurching forward again. 'Please, *stop*.'

The mannequin stops, but only because she's reached the end of the

hallway. The curtains snap open, pulled apart with one swift, clean, cybernetic gesture, and Tiffany sees what's on the other side and starts screaming, and it doesn't occur to her for a second that she's just repeating the scream she has to do during every performance at the end of "Hypnotised by You."

2.36 Tiffany's Question

The instinct which drove Tiffany to the tower block and to Miss Ruth—

—no, let's not say "instinct." That's prejudicial in itself. It suggests some higher, incorporeal sense, an eighth sense beyond the six normal ones (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell and gravity, human gravitational sense being the most obscure and overlooked of the six since so little on the surface of the world causes it to be alarmed) and the possible seventh one we've already discussed. Let's say:

The *information* which drove Tiffany to the tower block is difficult to pinpoint, though she must have overheard the address or, at the very least, the fact that Miss Ruth exists in this particular town. Unless you choose to believe that from now on every town will have one. But she knows *why* she was compelled to come here. She sees Miss Ruth, this friend-of-a-friend hoarder of all the world's media, as the root source of all wisdom. And tonight she wants the answer to one single, simple question:

Given all this talk of Grandfather's Axes, of bones and doppelgangers and hollow celebrities… given that some part of the idea of Faction Paradox can be considered the *real* Faction Paradox, just because of its relics … which part of her, if any, is the real her?

Or, to put it another way—given how much she feels she's lost, which parts of her uber-mass should she, as a bundle of flesh and bone, be holding on to?

Let us not dwell on the question of how she paid the taxi driver without cash.

2.37 Chlick

The Black Carriage pulls up on the kerb, under the broken street-light where the journey started. The door pops open with its usual *chlick*, and Valentine's released into the world again, a world of air that doesn't taste of crocodile-flesh and background noise that doesn't shatter the ribcage.

Then the car pulls away, and there's nothing but Valentine.

Valentine, looking… what? Shellshocked? Hardly. For a while he doesn't move, but just stands there on the pavement, re-adjusting to the outside world. Ignore the ambulanceman's coat, still draped awkwardly over his shoulders, and he could be waiting for a bus.

The ambulanceman's coat and, of course, the Red Uranium container that's dangling from his left hand.

He may have returned from this journey one hour older and one world wiser, but he doesn't look enlightened any more than he looks disturbed. He doesn't look like anything, much. Fatigue? The happy-pills? Or just the radiation exposure doing its work, making sure he remembers that he's one of the walking dead?

2.38 The Terror

It's not so hard to understand.

Is there any doubt that Valentine really does want to make the world a brighter, shinier, cuter place, with less sharp edges and a goodwill-to-heartbreak ratio of at least 3:1? No. No doubt at all. He *always* wanted to make things better. He was the kid who wanted to evenly share out his sugar mice in the playground, then, when he figured out that this didn't work as people took his sugar mice even if they already had sugar mice of their own, he spent a while as the kid who cared about the terrible, invisible, unfilmed things happening in parts of the world that didn't have their own news channels and movie industries. He was good at that.

But he grew up with the culture-in-general, the same as anyone else around here. We all know how you're supposed to deal with villains, crooks and political monsters, because we've seen it. We all know the same stories, we've all seen the same broadcasts. Invariably, those who are cruel, selfish and murderous will have some form of device of death, an impenetrable battle-station or an atomic bomb or just a *ship*, with which they intend to work their malicious will and slaughter the innocent, where not covered by "work their malicious will." Only one man can stop this. One man, delivering the missile to the battle-station's only weak spot, or defusing the bomb in the nick of time. The great human superstition, that one individual is always at the centre of the universe, written in letters bigger than the ones that say HOLLYWOOD.

When Valentine got old enough, he was given the right to vote. He voted. It was, as he well knew, his duty. The trouble is that… it didn't seem to *do* much. Rationally it was clear that a causal connection existed between the voting and the political process, but he was

unclear what this connection might be. Contrary to his expectations, when the ballot results were announced his candidate of choice never, ever, ever won by a single vote. This isn't what cinema had primed him for.

And when the War started, amoral and spurious and lethal as it was? He protested, naturally. He must have stood outside a hundred ministries and embassies before the final Demonstration Day, but at no point did he even glimpse a member of the world's current ruling executive, let alone get a chance to seize one by the arm and say 'please, think about what you're doing' (in such a desperate and impassioned voice that the politician would have no choice but to develop a troubled conscience).

Such impotence. Humanity isn't trained for that kind of helplessness. Quite the reverse.

The trouble is that he's been primed. Nobody who goes to the cinema can believe in democracy for long. Valentine has an abiding, deep-rooted faith in that one critical moment, the moment when one man hurls the grenade into the death-engine and brings comfort to the world, forever. When the Ship of War tears itself apart and fills the screen with a colossal explosion, all thanks to a single individual's efforts.

And people wonder why there are so many terrorists around these days?

2.39 Initiation Begins Here

'*There's the Good Mother and the Bad Mother*,' the TV voice is saying. '*We see this pattern over and over again*.' It's a woman's voice, and the volume is crippling, filling up the bass, the treble and the stereo picture all at once, going beyond amplification and beyond the range of normal speakers. Tiffany knows it's a TV voice anyway, because she's got instincts for that kind of thing, remember? Or she would have if she could stop screaming, if she hadn't already done a small fortune's worth of damage to her highly-insured vocal cords.

The light is flashing in the space beyond the curtain. Monochrome light. A strobe as big as all-the-world. She tries to look at her hands, stretched out in front of her, but then there *are* no hands. Just darkness, then shadows in the glare, then darkness, then darkness, then shadows, then darkness, then shadows, and *God* it isn't even regular, flashing on and off and off and off and on and and on. She can't exist in this light. There's nobody to see her in this light. And it isn't fair, because she's just started to learn about space, and now

suddenly it's been taken away from her.

'*Essentially, we can interpret this as a basic human need for resolution with the mother-figure*,' a second woman's voice adds. Are these angels and daemons, and if so, then why do they agree? Shouldn't one be on each shoulder? Tiffany looks up from her non-existent hands, realising that this must be an iteration of herself that's due to be erased, and that the mannequin-woman is still standing over her.

'*Absolutely*,' a third woman's voice adds. '*The evil mother must be confronted, often a literally painful experience in traditional sources, before the benefits of the experience become clear*.'

There's no space here, because this is the scene-of-scenes, the location from which all other locations can be accessed. But how does the mannequin-woman exist here, staring impassively down at her, when there isn't even any floor for her to stand on?

'*But taking into account the secondary evidence, the data on archetypal semantics collected by the Jungian movement as a whole, I think we ultimately have to conclude that… this isn't the Pit. This isn't the Pit at all*.'

The woman is a silhouette against the light and the no-light. The strobing makes it impossible to make out her features, at least with any reliability. The light flashes off, and when it flashes on again the mannequin has changed position, or just changed. A different face each time. A different profile against the blinding white.

No. That isn't the mannequin-woman, is it?

'*The fooood*,' says Tiffany, and she sounds exactly like the TV voices, big enough to fill up the world. She wonders if this is the way her uber-body sounds.

'*Something in the fooood*,' she elaborates, wondering why her throat still works if all her flesh is being stripped away.

'*Turn around*,' someone tells her.

So she does.

2.40 Makeshift Heart

Walking back to the ambulance, with the big yellow canister pulling at his arm, Valentine would be forgiven for thinking about all those voodoo-men who must have trodden this path before him. Voodoo-men, making their own nuclear devices. Not primed to explode, but built to slowly discharge sickness, radiation and the horror of Soviet research complexes into their victims, victims who might be a million miles away from the device itself. You have to wonder if this is how the War is *really* fought, the War-time powers tearing the face of the

town apart just by poking a great big map of the supposed battlefield.

Well, isn't that what guided missiles do, generally speaking? Give them the likeness of the victim, and… wham. Military-industrial sympathetic magic.

You also have to wonder about all those West Africans shamans with their magic camcorders. Whether they found they were getting better results with video images than old clay dolls. With a clay doll, it's obvious how things are meant to work—you just have to stick a pin through its makeshift heart and your supposed victim suffers a terminal collapse. With a videotape, though… what do you do? Erase someone's image, to try to wipe them out of history? Surely there's a temptation to rewind the tape, rolling back the victim's past, undoing his actions or even changing his life?

If these really *are* the thoughts currently going through Valentine's mind, then he must come within a whisker of concluding that the video age is conditioning people to accept time-travel, and that nobody like him would ever believe in the Ships of War if they hadn't learned so much from the rewind button.

2.41 Ur-Clich's

Imagine the quintessential Hollywood movie. Imagine that the world, or the country (probably America), or just the characters, are under threat from an outside force: aliens if possible, foreigners otherwise, a virus if you get desperate. Now imagine that at the climax of the story, at that most dramatically crucial moment when the future hangs in the balance and the enemy's about to destroy everything that's good and right and civilised, the day is ultimately saved. Not by a weapon, and not by a brilliant strategy. No, ultimately the day is saved by… wait for it… *the power of love*.

You'd think it was the most devastating cliché imaginable.

Now name three films which actually end that way. To Hell with it, try to think of even one.

There. Some clichés are clichés even though they've never actually happened. See how sensitive we are! See how psychic, when it comes to the culture! Deep down we know that it's what all those films *want* to say, and we'll be appalled if they're ever crass enough to come out and say it.

2.42 Valentine, Reprise

But let's recap what Valentine looks like as he steps out of the

sidestreet, onto that empty road where he left the ambulance. Shambling out into the street-light, he's not so much a human being as a thin, precariously-balanced stack of left-overs. The stumbling legs, the sweat-heavy t-shirt, the stubble and that distant, casually bewildered expression, which is now no longer capable of even saying "what?"

He's a mess. He's a mess who's carrying a metal container full of uranium. This is really not how people in his position are supposed to look, and he's aware of that even now.

You see, that's the thing. We all *tell* ourselves that we can't do terrible things, or unethical things, or extreme things or things that just seem too remarkable. We tell ourselves (for example) that we can't kill. Well… maybe not from a cold start. But you never get there from a cold start. You're told that there's a War on. You're told that everything's a potential security risk. You're told that it's a wise precaution to arm yourself. You start carrying a gun. You start noticing that everyone's getting nervous. You start hearing that you can't trust anybody, any more. You spend most of your time wondering where the first attack's going to come from, and you make sure the gun's always ready for action. Then finally the enemy shows himself, or it feels like the enemy's showing himself, or someone just jumps out at you from an alleyway and tries to get your wallet, or a bunch of kids start peddling cocaine on the street and you know—you *know*—that it's only a matter of time before they get you, or your family, or the woman in the flat next door whom you barely even know but at least she says hello to you every morning. What are you going to do? Back out after you've gone that far? A to B, B to C, C to D, D to E. Suddenly killing's a piece of cake.

See where Valentine is now, and see how he's stopped at every point on the way. He's chosen this path, but did he ever choose the end result? He knows that he has to keep going, that his own nature won't let him turn back, but if you'd told him a year ago that he'd be standing here with a container full of uranium… no, of course he wouldn't have believed it. Every step he takes feels like the point of no return, because in his own personal alphabet E has already led to F and F is just about to lead to G.

And while we're on the subject of the unbelievable: does it strike you as odd, at all, that the container he's carrying has its grip set into its *cap*? So that if you carry it in one hand, the weight of the contents constantly pulls at the join between the cap and the container, increasing the risk of it popping open and exposing the material inside?

Somebody somewhere gets paid for designing these things.

2.43 Hive-Mind

The great hallway. The hundred-thousand videotapes. And there are others, filling up the rest of the tower, their presence making itself known through the walls of satin. No: the satin is no longer relevant. The satin is purely physical, purely (as it were) material, a useful analogue to get the brain in the right mode for the *real* architecture of this place. This terrible, glorious place.

Tiffany Korta. There's sweat on every cell of her skin, mixing with the make-up that's running from her face, mixing with the poison that's trying to force its way up out of her body through the pores. She crawls along the floor of the hall, the great TV voice speaker-booming from the flashing, strobing space behind her. She can no longer speak, let alone sing. She can barely force her muscles to keep dragging her forward, away from the sanctum of Miss Ruth, the Great Mother.

She cannot, under any circumstances, look up.

But it's not all about her eyes, is it? She crawls past the shelves full of crawling, clattering videotape, and she can hear and feel and taste them, in ways that only homo imago is fully equipped to understand. Even so she tries to keep her eyes shut, but that way she keeps running into them, threatening to bring great masses of plastic down on top of her. And through her half-closed eyes she occasionally sees one of them, one of the tapes, just the corner of it as it perches on its shelf.

And she can see what's on it.

Not the pictures. Not the story. The meaning. Its place in the space that isn't space, its relevance to the here and now, its relation to the town and the War and the culture-in-general. Each one is huge, a pattern of information larger than anything which could possibly fit into that little black box, because it's not just about the tape itself but about all the people who've ever watched it. The pattern of meaning it's left behind, exactly the way the Executive tried to explain it to her, before she forgot most of it.

That's just one tape. One tape. Supposing she were to open her eyes fully, or even to try to stand and face this place. To confront it head-on.

'Good,' says the voice which told her to turn round. 'That's good. Now look up.'

'*Wuuuh*,' says Tiffany.

'Look up, girl.'

'*Wuuuh*,' Tiffany repeats. She's trying to ask why the Great Mother

is doing this to her, and what she'll see if she does as she's told.

Asked. Asked. Pop stars do as they're asked, not as they're told. The Executive never gives her executive orders, it makes suggestions. It can't be trying to hollow her out, to reduce her mass, to make her less substantial so that her doppelgangers and iterations will be more important—

'Look up and you'll see the Truth.'

The Truth?

Is *that* all?

2.44 Yes, That's All

Her eyes are open, but she's looking down. Out of the corner of one eye she can see a single videocassette, the nearest tape on the nearest shelf, unfolding itself like an insect spreading its wings and showing her the world inside it. So big. So very big. She experimentally lifts her head, just a little, to see what it's like if she focuses on *two* tapes at a time. But as soon as she tries it the two worlds overlap, and it's like butterflies mating and it makes her head hurt and she looks down again.

No, it's no good. She can't do this gradually. If she's going to look up, at the full horror of the room in front of her, then she's going to have to do it all at once. Lift her head and face it. Let it do what it likes to her.

One.

But this is going to hurt. This is going to hurt so much.

Two.

Often a literally painful experience in traditional sources.

Two-and-a-half.

'For Heaven's sake, girl,' says the voice, impatiently. 'Have you no self-discipline?'

Three.

2.45 Wakka

Inangela remembers the scene from *1984*, in which O'Brien—representing the authoritarian state, as Valentine would tell you—holds four fingers up in front of the captive Winston Smith, and demands that he sees five on pain of further torture.

'But you've only got three,' says Smith.

‘What?’ says his captor.

‘Three fingers,’ says Smith. ‘You’re a bear.’

‘Oh yeah,’ says Fozzie, who happens to be playing O’Brien in this sketch.

Damn. Inangela’s phasing out again.

2.46 Ready for the Second Half

When Valentine finally opens the driver’s door of the ambulance, and pulls himself into the seat, there’s something waiting for him on the passenger side. He doesn’t actually notice it until he’s behind the wheel, mainly because it’s only slightly bigger and only slightly more yellow than Coz’s flask. Indeed, it’s lying on the seat right *next* to Coz’s flask, suggesting some level of humour on the part of the people who put it there.

There’s nothing intrinsically strange about the second Red Uranium canister, especially since it’s virtually identical to the first. It makes sense that the Black Man’s minions, whoever they might have been, left it there while Valentine was miles away in the Black Carriage. True, he’s sure he left all the doors of the ambulance locked, but getting into a locked vehicle wouldn’t be a problem for people of that calibre.

There’s nothing intrinsically strange here at all. But it doesn’t matter. Things aren’t supposed to appear out of nowhere, even if you know there’s got to be a cause. Things particularly aren’t supposed to appear out of nowhere if nuclear material’s involved, or if you know there are people close to you who kill their enemies in the name of the witch-lodges and spend their lives shaping themselves into implacable urban magicians. These invisible scene-shifters. These *vodan* Santa’s little helpers.

2.47 Chrysalis

A hundred-thousand black carapaces open themselves up, unfolding their wings, revealing the full, appalling intensity of their patterning. Beyond the plastic, the patterns can be seen for what they really are.

Call it magnetism, call it what you like. Twenty-five images per second, 270,000 images per tape. These are the cells that make up the scales of their wings. Every frame describing more context than should fit into the whole of the tower, not just capturing a certain image at a certain point in time but connecting to an uncountable number of points of meaning. Every frame the size of lifetimes, locking together

as the membranes unfold, connections stretching between the cassettes as they reveal themselves in full. It's like natural engineering, the kind of precision you'd expect from the body of an insect, head then thorax then abdomen. Veins of meaning between tapes which, to the normal human eye, have nothing in common. Fragile lengths of narrative that could almost be cartilage.

Becoming a single, gorgeous, horrifying entity. One image is worth lifetimes, but one image is less than a pinprick on its black, translucent, slippery-shining skin. It rises out of the hallway, filling up the tower block even though it could stretch its wings to cover the whole world. And probably will. The patterns, those sticky black lines of force, seem vast when they're large enough to span the ceiling—but that's just the first inkling of the scale of its body, as it shrugs off the plastic and stretches out of its beetle-cell containers. There's the sensation of gigantic black armour-plated columns rising out of the hall, then hinging open somewhere higher up the tower block, legs rooting themselves in the upper floors. There are other archives up there, other collections at least as large as this one. Other sets of wings, only starting to break open as the creature shrugs off its casing and reaches out across the town.

But there's nothing to give this abomination any kind of scale, since it is its own environment. Try following the curve of its shell from here on floor eleven. There'll be the constant sense of motion, as your eyes and your skin make more and more sense of the connections between its segmented, component parts, and that's why it'll look like it's waking up and flexing its mass. Before long you'll only be able to navigate by the signs on its body, each one an impossibly complex frozen moment, and there'll be no up, no down, no geography that matches the geography of the place where you know you're standing. And as you follow that curve, and see it arching over itself so that the great chemical-stinking expanses of its body surround you on all sides, you'll eventually come to its face. And its face will, guaranteed, be looking down at you. And its eyes will inevitably have more facets than you have cells in your body.

Or at least, that's how it seems to Tiffany.

2.48 The Axe

My grandfather has an axe. He passes it down to my father, but the wooden handle has rotted, so my father replaces it. He passes it down to me, but the blade has become old and blunt, so I replace it. Is it still my grandfather's axe?

Ah, poor grandfather. He should've used bone.

The lore of Faction Paradox states that the founder of the Faction, the *original* Faction, can only be referred to as the Grandfather. Well, naturally. It's that family thing. Fathers and Mothers and Godfathers and Godmothers and Brothers and Sisters and Cousins and all the Once- and Twice-Removeds. There has to be a grand patriarch somewhere. Lore never states whether the Grandfather ever owned an axe, but it's a term that the Executive likes to use, for obvious reasons. Its philosophy of constant copying, of information always moving through the temporary medium of flesh, of human selves being irrelevant next to their uber-selves… it can all be summed up in one easy bumper-sticker phrase. *We are all Grandfather's Axes.*

See that use of language there, eight full-stops ago. The "original" Faction. As if the Faction itself is anything other than the greatest of all Grandfather's Axes.

And if the axe had been made with a bone handle? Then we would have been able to say no, it isn't the Grandfather's Axe at all, not once it's been replaced. Because as we already know, bone carries things which can't be seen by the human eye, but which any good ritualist should be able to awaken. Because only bone has power.

2.49 There Must Be a Pentagram

Inangela is kneeling on the concrete roof of the hi-rise car park, leaning forward with her elbows on the gravel and her big backside in the air. This being a *procedure* she's performing, if not a ritual in itself, she's wearing her mask. From our point of view she resembles a big black caterpillar, her limbs swallowed up in the folds of her heavy leather-and-lace ensemble, her only features being the two big, dark eyes at the front of her body. Clearly on the verge of her own metamorphosis.

Laid out on the ground in front of her is a map of the town, nearly two-dozen pages ripped out of the A-Z from the van, spread out to make one single diagram and overlapping itself in parts. The House of Marrero is parked nearby, with Horror sitting on the bonnet, fixing herself a cigarette. The top floor of the car park is open to the air, but they are, of course, the only people here. Naturally it's supposed to be a non-smoking area, although they've already spray-painted and triggered the speed camera outside so it's no good being coy.

This is the south-eastern edge of civilisation, where the community gives way to the out-of-town shopping complex. You can actually drive a little further out than this before reaching the wasteland, but by Inangela's reckoning the complex is a village in itself and the Great Urban Horror has more sense than to touch it.

‘Hah,’ says the Inangela-caterpillar, shuffling backwards.

Horror slides off the bonnet and goes to see what’s so ‘hah’ about the map. Inangela has taken a thick felt-tip pen and drawn a single pattern across the face of the town. It’s a five-pointed star, drawn in such a way that it looks as though the pen’s never left the paper. Or at least it might not have done, if the wind hadn’t kept blowing the pages out of position and Inangela hadn’t kept falling over onto her side. The star straddles the entire map, each of its points touching a location somewhere close to town limits.

‘Mnh?’ queries Horror, in her own unique way.

‘It’s a unicursal pentagram,’ Inangela explains, trying to sound as if she hasn’t been rehearsing this bit. ‘I *knew* you could do it. That’s where we started, look. Stopover.’ She points to one of the tips of the star, her hand extending from her caterpillar-body in a fashion which isn’t quite spectacular enough to make her look as if she’s butterfly-bound. ‘And if you line everything up right, then… you can join it up with the other four points. It’s a map of the ritual. There’s where we hit the first speed camera, see?’

She likes the word “hit,” in this context, and she taps the second point of the spot with her finger just to push the point home.

‘And that’s where we are now,’ she goes on, prodding the representation of the car park. ‘Just next to where we hit the second one.’

Horror squints and leans forward, deliberately dropping ash on a part of the town she’s never liked.

‘Some of the pages aren’t lined up properly,’ she points out. ‘You can see that ring-road twice. And you’ve covered up the roads by the cineplex.’

‘Well, I know that,’ says Inangela. ‘The pentagram wouldn’t be perfect if I’d lined the pages up properly.’

Horror wrinkles her nose, and nearly pops out one of the studs by mistake. ‘So… you’ve totally messed up the shape of the town, just so the pattern fits.’

‘You really don’t understand ritual, do you?’ says Inangela.

2.50 Understanding

At the age of fifteen, back in the pre-War days when she’d politely watch other people burning other people’s cars, Inangela was at one point dragged off the streets to answer a vox-pops survey in the offices of a publishing company. They were planning on launching a new

magazine, they said, aimed at the 15-19 age range, which Inangela thought was a bit suspect as to her that sounded like five different age ranges. More importantly, though, the questionnaire came with a free plate of chicken pasta salad and discreet, perfectly-formed cubes of cheese. It must have been important, because they had video cameras monitoring her reactions to the things they showed her and asked her.

At one point the man on the other side of the big round focus-grouping table wanted to know what she thought of all the other magazines aimed at people her age. With a mouth full of complimentary food, Inangela told him that she didn't think any magazine had ever been able to talk to people her age without patronising them.

Which the man found very, very interesting, so interesting that he actually wrote down some words instead of just ticking boxes. Inangela's meaning was quite clear to him. Easy to imagine the magazines to which she was referring, with their desperate, muddled attempts to talk the way "the kids" talked, their awkward attempts to mimic street-fashion even though most of the editors were fifty-year-old men with expensive apartments (apartments, mind you, not flats). Oh yes. Easy to imagine magazines like that.

Easy to imagine them. Except that they didn't really exist. God, when Inangela was a teenager she'd read *anything* with shiny photos and advice columns and pin-ups of pop stars looking melancholy yet sexually available. She didn't give a toss whether they were written by fifty-year-old men or computers with Gucci shoes. Easy to imagine, though, isn't it? Easy to picture that kind of stereotype, that image of a publisher getting it so horribly, tragically wrong. Easy to imagine it, because the publishers are so terrified of it.

She never found out whether the man behind the table ever used the information she gave him, although she occasionally wonders whether anyone else told him the same thing. Giving him an answer based not on your own version of the culture, but on the version of the culture that you rely on when you don't have anything else to say, a version that's based on the obsessions and anxieties of the people who build the culture in the first place.

Another great Inangela credo. *Bugger this world, that makes us come up with stupid opinions just so we don't look even stupider in front of the cameras. And bugger the world they're going to build, using those stupid opinions as their master-plan. Bugger it all!*

2.51 Orphée

Valentine carries his ‘phone in his uniform pocket. Ambulance crews aren’t encouraged to carry ‘phones. Officially this is because there’s a minimal risk of ‘phone transmissions jamming the emergency equipment in the back, although God knows who’d want to trust their survival to a piece of machinery than can be jammed by a ‘phone. Unofficially the reason’s a lot more obvious. People die in ambulances. Nobody wants to hear a ‘phone ringing in their final moments. It makes the dying individual feel *unfulfilled*, as if he or she can’t pass away in peace until the call’s been answered (because *not* answering a ‘phone when it rings is something that goes against every modern human instinct). And that’s true to the power of ten if, like Valentine’s ‘phone, the ring-tone’s a catchy tune from the hit parade circa 1985.

There’s still no movement in the Street of a Thousand Housing-Blocks. Still no sound except for the ocean-spray of far-away traffic. Sitting in the driver’s seat of the ambulance, as still as the urban landscape around him, Valentine concludes this just isn’t natural. He imagines being watched from every unlit window. He imagines the residents creeping out into the lamp-light as soon as he drives away, watching the ambulance vanish into the distance.

He stops thinking about these things, and dials an eleven-digit number into the ‘phone. (In the future, everybody will use the word “dial” as a verb but nobody will know what a “dial” is. How about that?) It rings exactly seven times before anyone answers, as usual. The click’s followed by a fuzzy silence, but no words.

‘Orphée,’ says Valentine.

There’s a pause. It’s the kind of pause which suggests glances being exchanged in the room at the other end of the line.

The woman’s voice says: ‘Go.’

‘I’ve got it,’ Valentine says. He wonders if he should avoid using any distinct nouns in this conversation, but then, anyone who might be able to listen in really should know everything already. ‘I’m ready to, ahh… I’m ready.’

Another pause. Then: ‘You’ve got it?’

Oh, surely that can’t be surprise? Better just check that… well, just check. ‘You… do still want me to go ahead with this?’ he asks.

‘Yes. Yes, we still want you to go ahead with this.’ A moment’s hesitation. ‘We appreciate your efforts, Mr. Orphée. We have certain limitations, where the balance of the War’s concerned. You know that.’

‘I’m not doing this just for you,’ says Valentine, more harshly than he meant to. But it’s important he makes himself clear here, just in

case anybody thinks of him as being entirely under someone else's thrall. In case *he* starts to think that way.

The truth is, though, that he never even would have come close to getting this far without the voice on the 'phone.

'We understand,' says the voice. 'You're a dedicated man. We respect that.'

2.52 The Mouthpiece

There's a curious quality to the voice on the 'phone, even apart from its metallic finish (a result, Valentine's sure, of the woman applying some kind of deliberate distortion). She speaks like a politician, like the spokesman of a big corporation who's got to sound sympathetic about a chemical spill but can't take any of the blame. But even apart from the machine noise, the words are forced and jagged at the edges. She's not a pro. There's an anger running through everything she says. Valentine knows the signs well enough, given that in his line of work it's important to know in advance when a grieving relative's going to become a walking, talking, seething, spitting need for revenge. She's mouthing the words, but corporate etiquette is a stranger to her.

Valentine doesn't exactly feel alienated by that, although it does remind him that whatever sense of helplessness, desperation and—to be honest—violence he might be carrying around with him, he's probably better at keeping it under control than certain other people.

The voice continues to tell him about the balance of the War, about the importance of people like "Orphée" making the decision to become personally involved, and even if everything she says is true there's still the after-taste of reassurance to all of this. Frankly, by now Valentine's in no doubt about what he's going to do and the only "reassurance" he needs involves the technical specifics. But the woman's a mouthpiece, that's all. Does she have an intimate knowledge of bomb construction? Does she know the exact mechanics of Ships of War? It seems unlikely.

'It's all right,' Valentine tells her. 'I'm ready. I can do this.'

'We're confident of that,' says the mouthpiece.

Then there's a noise from the back of the ambulance, as the girl in the mask starts to choke.

2.53 It

Tiffany has no option but to look into its face. She could close her

eyes, but it's not her eyes that let her see it. Magnetic patterns brush against every cell of her skin, just as the electrical signals from the tower trigger nervous tissues in her spinal cord which have barely ever been used. The noise of Miss Ruth's screening-room, the sound of voices speaking through several decades of videotape degradation and entertainment history, are her last link to the more conventional senses. Her brain's trying to convert the new sensory data into forms it can understand. Tiffany now knows that magnetism smells like acid, like something toxic and corruptive that you'd find lining a termite nest, and that real electricity leaves a far, far worse taste on the tongue than the buzz you get from licking a domestic battery.

She looks into its face. She can't help it, even when it lowers its head, and something sharp and electrical drops from the space beneath its enormous eyes, and she feels the tip of it rip through her back and plant itself in her backbone, all without breaking the skin or doing the slightest damage to her highly-fashionable top.

'*Whhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaa*,' she says. She can remember how to speak, but she has to fight the urge to say she's sorry. On the most primal level, that's the only way this Catholic child has of making the pain stop. To beg forgiveness and hope for the best. What she really wants to ask, between apologising and asking it not to kill her, is:

What did you put in the food?

2.54 Rush

'Sugar, dear,' sighs the voice of Miss Ruth. She says it as if she's a parent, aunt or teacher, but only now—now that hearing is the only "common" sense Tiffany can hold on to?—does Tiffany realise just how young the woman sounds. Her voice is sarcastic as much as patronising. Talking down to her visitors from the Pit not because she has the wisdom of age, but because she finds their questions quite, quite ridiculous.

Tiffany is already beginning to understand just how stupid all her questions have been. The sharp, electrical, acid-scented thing is still hooked into her back, and deprived of the more familiar sense of touch she gets the impression of being suspended in mid-air, dangling from a spike that runs through her whole body. She certainly can't feel her feet touching the ground any more. She can't feel her feet at all. It's possible she's fallen onto her back, that she's lying on the floor of the hallway with the flow of information cut off between her brain and her skin. Alternatively it's possible that the creature is holding her up in front of its face.

Above her head Tiffany can see the slick, black scales of its eyes, every one a frozen image, every one connecting to God-knows-how-many other cells of meaning throughout its body. All the images she can see in the nearest of its compound eyes are faces, all culled from the lengths of tape in the collection, all freeze-framed at one specific point. From here it looks as if they're trapped, lost human beings held so fast that they can't stop grinning for long enough to scream. Tiffany notices, then, that one of the faces is her own. She wonders if it's just a reflection, but her other face has its mouth half-open, locked in an ugly, awkward position, obviously caught in mid-song. Parts of her are in this collection, somewhere. Parts of her are parts of this monster.

'Duuuuuuuuuuuuuuh,' Tiffany screams. What she means is:

Drugs! In the food! Drugs!

The voice of Miss Ruth (this monster's keeper?) blows through its invisible nose. 'Oh, don't be so melodramatic. You wanted the Almiona sauce, that's all. You can't make Almiona sauce without sugar. You were quite specific when Jacqueline asked you, so really, you can hardly complain.'

'Nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah.'

No, you must have given me something else. Sugar isn't a drug. Sugar can't make you hallucinate like this.

'Don't be so absurd,' Miss Ruth's voice tells her. 'Of course it's a drug. It promotes hyperactivity, it distorts perception of time and as a matter of fact it's rather useful in disciplinary training. You'd be amazed how well-behaved someone can be, if you regulate their intake of sugar. And you have been taking it for some time now, haven't you, dear? I can't think of the damage it must have done to your poor nervous system.'

'Pllllllluuuuuuuuuuh. Pllllluuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh.'

Please. Tell me the truth. What's inside me? What's inside me now?

'Only what you brought with you,' Miss Ruth tells her.

2.55 The Suspects

A childhood of sugar, a lifetime of domestic poisons, a career built on cocaine and lack of context. A body in a state of come-down, hyper-sensitive due to stress, long-term paranoia and the glorious, sickening sensation of leaving behind everything you know. The smack of initiation. Fatigue on top of that, and the adrenaline after-effects of a performance in front of a crowd full of skulls, plus a deeply-ingrained series of beliefs which jeopardise her identity by

their very nature. A nervous system raised in an environment where radio signals, magnetic patterns and microwave damage weren't more than three feet away at any single point—a skin so thin it can sense, without looking, whenever anybody in the room switches on a mobile 'phone.

A hallway full of crawling, multiplying video-cassettes, specifically designed to put anyone who approaches them in a state of heightened anxiety. An inner sanctum full of stroboscopic lights that make it impossible to even maintain a sense of direction.

And yet, bizarrely, as Tiffany comes face-to-face with the thing that unfolds itself from Miss Ruth's collection to swallow (nay, *become*) the whole wide world… her first instinct is to ask whether she's been drugged.

2.56 Five and See Six

The House of Marrero pulls away from its space in the deserted car park, circling once for luck before it moves off down the grey concrete funfair-ramp towards ground level. The map of the town remains where Inangela left it, spread out on the roof, the pages pinned down by various pieces of rubbish from the van to stop them blowing away. Leaving it there, with the ink of the pentagram leeching into the streets, it looks like a sacrificial altar in a particularly evil church. Brookland Street smoulders on what used to be page 74 of the A-Z, where Horror dropped the fag-ash onto it.

'So where now?' says Horror, back in the driver's seat.

'South-west edge,' says Inangela. 'Third speed camera.'

'What if there's no speed camera there?'

'Trust me.'

Horror's prepared to go along with this. But she does have one more salient question.

'Why five, then?' she asks. 'Why d'you have to do five cameras? Is it just 'cos the star looks good, or…?'

Inangela's mask gives her a pitying look. 'It's not about fives,' she says. 'It's about sixes.'

'Umm?'

'We have to make six stops to complete the pentagram, all right? Because we have to go back to the stopover where we started, and hit the camera there—'

'Was there one there?'

‘—and hit the camera there to make the pattern join up. And everything happens in sixes.’

‘Does it?’

‘Of course it does. Six points of the ritual. Six colours of the rainbow. Plus there’s the six important food-groups. Meat, coffee, pasta salad, oriental, fried fish and alcohol.’

‘What about chocolate?’ queries Horror.

‘Chocolate is universal,’ Inangela announces, grandly.

2.57 Physics

Some of this requires explanation, of course. Inangela’s reference to the six colours of the rainbow might seem to indicate that she’s particularly badly-educated, or (less likely) the product of a parallel universe with a marginally different view of nature. But as ever, it’s got more to do with wanting to make a statement.

Inangela is a ritualist, far more so than most human beings, or perhaps just far more consciously. Such superstitions have a value which she refuses to ignore, even if they don’t have any scientific basis whatsoever. But that’s the crux of it, really. These rituals she performs, this nineteen-year-old’s insistence on giving meaning to every omen… it isn’t *real*, it’s just her own way of navigating the world around her, of shifting the map slightly until she finds the place she’s heading for. She’s convinced, however, that science is more or less the same thing.

She’s stared at the rainbow any number of times—meaning, she’s stared at diagrams of the spectrum on educational kids’ TV, because you don’t get real rainbows in this town—and not once has she been able to see the seven colours she was taught about in school. They bleed into each other so much. She’s tried drawing lines across the spectrum in any number of places, and the idea of making seven sections out of it doesn’t make any sense to her at all. Mainly because, as she once told Horror in no uncertain terms:

‘Nobody cares about indigo or violet. It’s just purple.’

Six is a much nicer number. She’s been convinced of that for, oh, at least a year now, and she intends to believe it for at least another year before she thinks about flirting with thirteen.

2.58 The Nature of the Beast

Its head comes closer. Its eye studies Tiffany from such a short

distance that the space between them burns with the stench of the acid, magnetic pulses and electrical sparks crackling against the skin on her face and making her muscles twitch.

She's still staring up at her own image, trapped behind the skin of the monster's eyeball. She's sure the other version of herself is in pain. She tries to look away, shifting her senses towards one of the other x-million images captured in the thing's eye, and eventually she manages it even though the electrical signals sting her whenever she tries to change her focus. She finds herself looking at another trapped, open-mouthed face, a pale boy standing in a crowd of people, obviously pulling a face for the camera. He wouldn't have done it if he'd known that this particular part of himself would end up stuck here for all eternity. With video, you don't need to wait for the wind to change direction. Having recently come to understand infinity, Tiffany has now concluded that she's going to be here forever, with the sharp, needle-bright mandibles of the creature forever taking her apart but never killing her.

'*Whhhaaaaaah*,' she says, and she's surprised that she nearly finishes the word. '*Whaaaaat. Whaat. What iiiiis. This. What iiiis thiiisss?*'

'Don't you know?' asks the voice of Miss Ruth. She sounds thoroughly bored.

Tiffany does know, or thinks she does. Before the huge, many-faced insect-eye filled up her vision, she saw its wings cover the whole world. Black scales across the sky.

'*Cuuuuuuuuultuurrrrrrrrreeeeeee*,' Tiffany screams. It's not a word that comes naturally to her, although it's the word her Executive would use.

But Miss Ruth tuts, in a way which suggests that she just wants to watch her programmes and that all this is very distracting. The concept of Tiffany suffering eternal agony, eternal stasis in the eye of the beast, isn't of much interest to her.

'Honestly,' says Miss Ruth. 'You really think that's the extent of human culture? That little thing?'

Of course. Miss Ruth can see it as well, but she's used to it so she doesn't feel as if it's puncturing and pouring acid into every nerve of her body. Tiffany braves the shocks of static and tries to take in the enormity of the eye alone, the numberless human faces trapped in its gaze. This "little thing." This "little thing" which can comfortably wrap itself around the world, with legs that can bury themselves miles below the surface of human experience.

It occurs to her, suddenly, that an awful lot of the trapped faces

appear to be people standing in crowds. Some of them waving, for all eternity. Some of them watching things taking place off-camera, recorded somewhere else in the body of the beast. She manages to focus on her own image again, and for the first time realises how central to the great eye her face is. In fact—

'If you saw the *whole* of human culture, you'd kill yourself in a second,' muses Miss Ruth. 'No discipline. No comprehension. Deluded little creature.'

It seems absurd to consider. In Miss Ruth's eyes, both Tiffany and the abomination count as "little," unless she was actually talking about the creature being deluded instead of her, or both of them, or…

Wait.

Finish the thought.

—in fact, now Tiffany sees more of the eye, aren't there *other* images frozen there which almost, but not quite, match the image of herself?

It's a terrible thought, that she might be trapped inside this abomination in any number of forms, frozen in any number of hideous, contorted poses. It's true, though. For a moment the faces which belong to *her* light up like little yellow glints in its eye, and a moment later she very nearly glimpses the pattern which links them together. A moment after *that* she comes close to seeing the wider pattern, the pattern that links every frame of the eye to every other frame in its body, million by million, all different moments and different perspectives, all connected by nerves of meaning, all parts of the same thing, all parts of the same event, all perceptions of the same *person* and

it pulls away further, and all along its body, the

cells are connected, from the eye to the head, from the head

from the head to the body, the

the body, the

body so big, it plants itself so far under the earth, and along the

lengths of the wings, branches of skin

across the world

across the world

covering the world with its scales, every scale connected

every scale the same thing

the same identity

the same person or

people watching that person

filming that person

one greater form

one body

one self

all linked together

all linked together

all

all

all

of

me

2.59 It (Reprise)

‘I’MMMMMMM SOOOO BIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIGGG!!!!!!’ screams Tiffany, obviously horrified as well as enlightened.

‘Well, finally,’ sighs the voice of Miss Ruth, and things go unexpectedly quiet as she turns her television off.

3. Pre-Pre-Dawn

3.00 Vigil

Not a word that's used much any more, "vigil." A period of watchfulness, often held over the body of the newly-dead, before the patterns decay and the flesh becomes shapeless. Those whose lives intersected the life of the deceased gather, or used to gather, to sit and pray and observe.

Hard to say what they were watching for. Signs of life? A later-than-last-minute reprieve?

There's a body on the hard, flat surface (nobody would want to say "slab") in the morgue, and as it no longer has any need for depth or texture or colour of its own. It's started taking on the qualities of the room around it. The skin has already taken on a hint of green, not through decay but just to match the strip-light and the cloth that covers her—covers *it*, the dead don't need gender—up to the chin. There's nothing here. No sense of the place being haunted, nothing macabre or even melancholy. Just an absence. Where there's no life there's no meaning. These cells used to belong to a fourteen-year-old girl, but she doesn't exist any more. What's left is a rough approximation, without the fine details that make a living thing. The spark in the brain. The electrical signals that force the heart to beat. The fine balance of nervous tissue.

But there was meaning here, yesterday. There was a vigil, of the most modern kind, and like everything modern it happened very very quickly. The dead girl's father arrived to make the obligatory identification. It's the same ritual, at heart. This century knows there are no ghosts, and knows that although it's not *impossible* for someone on the hard, flat surface to come to life again, it's really not going to happen when the body's been stabbed in the torso so many times. But it's that last, desperate chance to find a loophole. It might not really be her… no, it is.

Once the corpse ID's done, the law and the state can play their part in proceedings. The bureaucracy which surrounds *any* violent death, as ritualistic as anything else that's likely to happen in town tonight, can be gradually and carefully assembled around the body. Now that the vigil's over.

3.01 The Great Urban Horror (Press

Shots)

Inangela has thought about what the Great Urban Horror might look like, should it choose to make itself seen. She's read enough newspapers to know what a town like this is afraid of, or what it *seems* to be afraid of. It's afraid of foreigners, of course. It's afraid that if the barriers around this little patch of geography should slacken for just a moment, the town will be filled with rabid dogs (which are apparently common, everywhere else in the world) or terrorists with impenetrable accents and appalling religions. It's afraid that paedophiles and pit-bulls will attack its children. It's afraid of crack and crack addicts. It's afraid of human disease, cancer on a day-to-day basis but AIDS when social phobias are in season. It's afraid of any combination of these things, pit-bulls with rabies, paedophiles who give crack to children and terrorists with viral weapons.

In fact, all of this is window-dressing. The town's real fears are far more primal, but primal things can't be expressed so easily, and the newspaper editorials are only totems. Symbolic approximations. Even so, Inangela still has a good mental picture of the Great Urban Horror as it pulls itself out of the ground. A drug-addled mass of howling, bestial blubber, it sucks the children into its corpulent, contagious bulk and breaks their bodies down into something like its own flesh and blood.

Too literal, but not a bad guess. Although if Inangela thought it was *literally* true then even she might balk at the idea of waking it up.

This is what the word "Beast" means to her. Like most people, she has a gut sense that there are things in the world which transcend the merely human and this is just her model for it. It's never occurred to her, for example, to think of these great and terrible things as black-shelled and insect-like. This could be because she didn't grow up in a city full of mosquitoes, or because she's never had an out-and-out hallucination after being primed by the "architecture" of floor eleven of Miss Ruth's tower-block.

3.02 Coming Down

The automaton woman, whose name must be Jacqueline, shunts herself back into the waiting room on her hydraulic legs. She's carrying another plate of food, which she offers to Tiffany without comment. Tiffany shakes her head. Her stomach's empty, and the smell of soy sauce and waterchestnuts is not altogether displeasing, but she suddenly finds herself with a hang-up about putting *anything*

more into her body. Any flavouring could be a world-altering substance, especially once it's slapped on top of all the other ingredients in her blood and her belly.

Tiffany is sitting on one of the black leather sofas again, hugging her knees on the squeaky cowhide and trying not to go completely foetal. It's quiet here now. There isn't even any standard TV background noise from behind the curtains, but for once Tiffany finds the signal-silence comforting. She still feels the occasional electrical pattern prickling on her skin, making her nerves twitch, especially when Jacqueline pulled aside one of the curtains in the room and revealed just a hint of the collection beyond.

Can someone like Miss Ruth even exist, without the sound and light from the screen in her inner sanctum? Now it's all gone quiet, Tiffany can't help but get the impression that… Miss Ruth has simply ceased to be. Her part has been played. There's certainly been no trace of her since Tiffany found herself here in the waiting room, being led out of the dark by Jacqueline.

Now Jacqueline stands up straight again, but the plate remains precisely-balanced on one hand.

'It may be your last meal,' Jacqueline advises her, not without some pity. Albeit a kind of functional, mechanical pity. Tiffany starts, and looks up, but Jacqueline's face remains as impassive as ever.

'As you are now,' she adds.

'I don't understand,' says Tiffany.

Jacqueline pauses, apparently wondering how much she should say and how much is for Tiffany to work out by herself.

'She says you're becoming something else,' she explains, eventually.

Is this Miss Ruth's last word? Absurdly, Tiffany was half-expecting the final piece of advice to arrive on a little piece of paper, like a fortune-cookie message.

'Something else,' Tiffany repeats.

'Something else,' Jacqueline confirms. 'Once you cut your last link to the Pit.'

Then she offers Tiffany the plate again, and the hint of green pepper wipes away the last traces of insect-acid from Tiffany's confused senses. Even so, Tiffany finds herself thinking about the habits of bugs. The way they'll consume vast amounts of the world around them before entering their chrysalis stage, ready for the great metamorphosis into a butterfly or a moth or Heavenly-mother-knows-what.

She reaches for one of the long, slender, spring-roll-scented creations on the plate. She supposes it won't hurt to try one before she leaves. Like Jacqueline says, she might not get another chance to use her stomach.

3.03 Greek Chorus

'We're probably going to find some hidden places,' says Inangela.

Horror's squinting at the road in front of her. This isn't a well-known or well-charted part of the town-at-night, and the relevant pages are missing from the A to Z. Up ahead there's a ring-road, one of the prayer-wheels of lights that marks out the core of the town, but the headlights are marking out the shadows of thorns and poison ivy on either side of the route. Signs that hardly anybody ever comes this way, even if the undergrowth isn't ready to risk crossing from one side of the road to the other.

'Hidden places,' Horror repeats.

'Yeah. Places you can only get to once.'

'Uh-huh,' says Horror, who must surely know that an explanation's inevitable. It's all the prompting Inangela needs.

'Say there's a shop, okay?' Inangela says. 'It's a little shop out of the way somewhere, and it's run by an old man with half-moon glasses on, and it sells antiques and curiosities and… and all kinds of things like that. And the shop's all done up in wood, probably. It's all old-fashioned. And you buy something from him—'

'Hold on,' says Horror. 'Has this actually happened to you, or…?'

'I'm just saying,' says Inangela. 'You buy something from the shop, and… I don't know. It changes your life, somehow. It's cursed, but if you prove you're a good person then you live through the curse, so you're never sure whether it *was* the thing you bought or whether you're just imagining it. So the next day—'

'The next day after what?'

'After your life changes,' says Inangela. 'After… I don't know… the thing you bought makes your dead relatives come back or brings all the toys in your house to life or something. The next day—'

'If you survive,' Horror points out.

'If you survive, yeah. But if you're a good person then you're bound to survive, that's the way it works. It's a rite of passage.'

'You're obsessed with rites of—'

'If you survive,' Inangela says, insistently. 'If you survive then the

next day you go back to the shop. And…'

'And?'

'Ahhhhh. It isn't there.'

'You mean, a rocket's hit it?'

'No. I mean, it's just gone.'

'Like a rocket's hit it.'

'It's *gone*. Maybe… oh, I don't know… the two shops on either side of it are still there, but now they're next to each other. And nobody in the neighbourhood knows what you're talking about when you ask them where the shop went.'

'Yeah,' says Horror. 'I bought a car radio from a shop like that.'

Inangela sighs wearily, but she can't do it as well as Miss Ruth. 'The point is, all the secret places are going to light up wherever we go. That's the kind of night this is.'

Horror checks the clock on the dashboard, green LED with an annoying flashing colon and a tendency to turn the "7"s into "1"s, the "O"s into "U"s and the "8"s into mystery pictograms.

'Don't have much night left,' she points out.

Inangela tuts. 'Just get us to the north-east side of town.'

'Which way's that?'

'Just… oh, for Heaven's sake, look. Can you find your way back to Chemikaze Lane?'

'Yeah,' says Horror.

'Good. Do that. I'll tell you the way from there.'

'Won't it make your pattern go all bendy?'

'Who's the ritualist here?' asks Inangela.

3.04 Who is the Ritualist?

The fact that there are seven colours in the spectrum was established in the seventeenth century, by Sir Isaac Newton, by common consent the Godfather of rationalist science. Like Inangela he was also convinced that it was possible, as well as desirable, to call upon certain forces in order to draw angels and daemons to Earth. Newton was a notoriously keen alchemist, something that's really to his credit, since alchemy was considered a disgraceful way to spend your time even in those days. He saw no difference between alchemy and rational physics whatsoever.

He and Inangela, however, have to be seen as players on different teams—opponents, if not exactly sworn enemies. The difference between them is simple. Newton was pathologically attracted to the number seven, considering it to be the holy number of God, which is why—on examining the spectrum—he decided there were definitely *seven* colours visible there. This is scientific fact. By contrast, Inangela considers seven to be a shifty, untrustworthy number, the kind of number that thinks it's superior simply because it's so awkward, and she never, ever uses it in rituals.

Though their approaches are similar, the aesthetics are quite different.

3.05 Valentine and the Faction (2)

Demonstration Day, fourteen months ago. The last ever Demonstration Day. No, the last ever *attempt* at Demonstration Day, the only attempt after the War came to town.

The thing you've got to remember about the War is that it makes people *jumpy*. Maybe that's why it looks so erratic to ordinary human beings like us, because the powers who run it have to keep us on our toes. Any of us might be next. Which is probably why the town seemed so hostile, when those who used to organise the Bazaar of Dissenters announced that another Demonstration Day was to be held here inside town limits. How dare they? Didn't they realise it was in bad taste? How could they possibly consider protesting against the world, when their own people were dying and they themselves could die *at any minute*? The fact that most of them were objecting to the War itself was, frankly, neither here nor there.

Valentine was there, as expected. Oddly, there wasn't any sun in the square that day even though the town was going through a heatwave at the time. It really was a ridiculously blunt omen. No daylight in the square, just a ceiling of grey, greasy cloud, and a long-range rumbling like mortar fire. Those who credit the War-time powers with the ability to control the weather, or worse, might want to read something into that.

What Valentine remembers most, however, are the policemen. Black uniforms surrounding the square on all sides, forming ranks between the statues of dead celebrity politicians, standing like gargoyles on the doorsteps of every public building. "In case of public disturbance." Lines of officers blockading the streets, stopping group A from meeting group B, separating the speakers from their audiences, coming between friends and casual conversationalists alike. Rows of police vans, each filled with half a dozen more men than would ever

be needed on the streets, parked along the roads one after another so that nothing could cross from one pavement to another.

There was no violence. Did there need to be? If a single policeman had actually *used* his baton, if a single dissenter had been given a broken nose or a fractured ribcage, then it might have been a *cause celebre*. But no. No oppression by a fascist super-state here. No Orwell-boot stamping on a single human face, and no reason for a single news channel in the world to show the day's events.

As if the fact that nobody was permitted to speak wasn't important in itself.

Valentine left after the first hour, tired of being crushed against other human beings and herded into gutters full of broken glass bottles when all he'd wanted to do was listen. Forty minutes later he was mugged, stabbed in the leg and spat at by a group of four teenagers who had nothing to do with Demonstration Day whatsoever, and all while eight vans full of heavily-armed policemen were stationed just two streets away.

3.06 Inevitability

As expected, Inangela is planning on completing the Speed-Camera Pentagram in a most correct and precise fashion. The pentagram design allows you to draw a five-pointed star without lifting your biro from the paper once, and she intends to criss-cross the town in the same way.

It's pre-pre-dawn by now. There's no sign of the sun, but if there were birds here then they'd be singing in anticipation. The sky's going from black to grey. There's no real name for this colour of sky, except maybe "television"—that dark, muddy grey, maybe tinted with the slightest reflection of green, seen when you switch off an old TV set and the light hasn't quite faded from the glass.

No flashes over the dwarf-mills of Chemikaze Lane now. The factory skylines take on a different shape against the grey, all jagged and crack-toothed.

'You okay?' Inangela asks Horror. It's worth asking, at this point in the morning. It's the point when Horror starts to get tired. The girl's eyes start to glaze over as she stares at the road.

Inangela worries Horror will start to get hypnotised, which is why she insisted on making another brief stopover-stop on the way back into town, right after they hit the last camera. The stopover was small and cheap, nothing like the one where they started, but that was okay because Inangela was determined to make it a flying visit and not to

get distracted by the food-racks. She bought a single packet of prawn crackers, ingeniously marketed as a snackfood with a little plastic pouch of sauce inside the bag to give it that air of interactivity. Inangela hopes a constant stream of these new sensory experiences will keep Horror alert.

'Want one?' she asks, waving the crackers under Horror's nose. Note: want one. Because there's such a thing as over-stimulation.

'Already eaten,' says Horror. Meaning, she's eaten in the last six minutes.

'Yes, but you need a more balanced diet,' Inangela insists.

Horror gives her a look.

And that's the big mistake, isn't it? Horror's taken her eyes off the road. One glance at Inangela, but it's enough to break the spell that keeps the House of Marrero going (because *something's* got to be holding it together other than matter). And now she's opening her mouth, to deliver one singularly laconic comment, but the van's moving at fifty and she's not looking where she's going and—

'Shit!' shouts Inangela. Who's the first one to see the girl appear in the road in front of them, like a target in the headlights, rushing forward out of the dark and pretty much daring the House to hit her.

3.07 Back from the Dead

Valentine, newly-returned from the Land of the Dead, stands at the front window of his flat and looks out on the street down below. The flat isn't lit—even at this time of the morning, there's enough of a glare from the street-lamps and the shop-fronts to let him find his way around. And find his way around is what Valentine has to do, since this isn't the place where he lives any more, even if the piles of books are functionally identical to *his* piles of books and the empty fried rice cartons on the floor are much like *his* empty fried rice cartons. If he feels as if every cell in his body has died and been replaced, all in the course of an hour, then that's only to be expected. Radiation can have side-effects like that. Everybody knows it.

When he finally turns away from the window, the first thing he does is switch on the television. He wants—needs—background noise for the next part of the operation. He can't bear the thought of putting the various parts of the device together in silence. Silences are just begging for loud noises, bangs and flashes especially. If the bomb becomes unstable, let it at least become unstable while there's an audience laughter track.

Once it warms up (oh yes, it's an *old* TV), the screen provides Valentine with the sight of a cartoon racoon being chased by two children. The racoon has something which possesses magical properties, something that's available in both plain and toffee flavours, and the children want it badly. Valentine doesn't stay around to find out what.

The next thing he does is use the toilet.

After that he'll head for the bedroom.

3.08 The Girl in the Mask?

Oh, she was breathing, the last time Valentine checked. Definitely breathing. The choking had stopped by the time he scrambled into the back of the vehicle, so he was too late to do anything about the muscular spasms, the short, electrical bursts of activity that made her limbs twitch like frog's legs and her torso lift itself at least two inches off the stretcher. It must have shaken something loose inside her body, cleared an airway, shifted a misplaced fragment of bone to one side, anything. Because she was breathing again.

And Valentine panicked. The night's mission be damned, the Faction go to Hell. There was something Valentine should have been doing, something urgent and medical, and he didn't know what. This, in the normal run of things, was where Coz would take over. This was where Valentine would shout, 'She's breathing again!' and Coz would give him the benefit of two decades' experience. The wisdom in question would've been flawed, if not entirely made-up, but it would've been enough to give some meaning to the ride back to the hospital.

Valentine panicked, because he knew how to use the defibrillator and he knew how to stop Coz breaking the legs of drink-driving cases, but he didn't know *this*.

But as soon as he realised that, she went quiet again. Clearly the two things were connected. Clearly she only came up for air to see if Valentine was worthy of helping her, and clearly he failed her. He wondered whether he should take off her mask, at the very least, but once again he couldn't help feeling that the mask was the only thing keeping her alive. It was certainly the only thing giving her a sense of identity.

She's alive, though, out in the ambulance. Out in the street behind Valentine's home, with two half-masses of Red Uranium for company. He knows she's alive, but the choking sounded like a literal last gasp and now she's got to be fading for good.

If I'd driven straight to the hospital, she could've lived.

Oh, you knew that was coming. How about this:

That was her last chance to stay alive. If I head for the hospital now, it'll be too late.

Or: *she's going to die.*

Or: *she's going to die whatever I do.*

Or: *how the Hell can I care about her, knowing where I'm going from here?*

Or, best of all: *why am I even pretending?*

3.09 Near Miss (2)

Some moments fit the tempo of the memory better than others. The moment when the van almost hit the girl left several long-lasting impressions on Inangela, all of them involving tiny details.

From this point on she'll find it hard to forget the girl's face—wide-eyed and mascara-smudged, hair primly and precisely dishevelled, not looking particularly shocked to see the van bearing down on her and probably not registering what it actually was. (It doesn't occur to Inangela, yet, that the face really should be heavily imprinted on her memory already.)

The other detail that'll stick in the mind is the smell of the prawn crackers. From this moment on, Inangela will have an astonishing tendency to associate sudden, catastrophic stimuli with prawn crackers. The smell of mass-produced oriental sauce as the van dug its wheels into the road and slouched to one side (the only word to describe it, as vehicles tend to move like their owners, although no human being could possibly slouch at 50 MPH). One of the crackers crumbling in Inangela's hand while the girl tried to throw herself out of the van's way, then vanished from Inangela's line of sight as everything became one big jumble of exotic sensory data.

Against all probability, Horror was the first to unbuckle her seatbelt, shove open her door and plop out of the vehicle onto the road. Inangela's response was to be unsure how close to get. She's now troubled by her own lack of humanitarianism, but on some level she's already starting to wonder what they're going to do if they've killed somebody. This was *not* supposed to be a blood-ritual, and suddenly she finds herself menaced by the thought that this might be an inevitable part of the process. The more rational sections of her brain, fuelled by panic as well as the cracker smell, even begin to wonder if they can find a way of planting the body at a War site so that nobody

thinks anything strange is going on.

Horror's report on the situation, audible from inside the van as she hurries back from the roadside: 'Yeah. It's that girl who looks like Tiffany Korta.'

It'll surprise no-one to hear that Inangela and Horror are going to give her a lift.

3.10 In Memorium

Another factor which makes it so very, very easy to half-believe in the impossible time-travelling weapons of the War-time powers—the fact that somehow, the War never seems to kill anybody who knows anybody.

That people die is unquestionable. Valentine's well aware that whole communities have been scraped off the face of the world since the War began, and in the two years since it rolled into this town it's levelled tenements, high-rise towers, suburban precincts, corner-shops, railway stations, overpasses, underpasses and even War memorials. No schools yet, but we live in hope. The point is that almost every rocket which detonates within town limits kills *somebody*, as even the most War-friendly newspapers admit. Yet…

…no grieving relatives are ever shown on the news. No shell-shocked employees walk into their offices the next day and say, 'You know that Peter Morgan from room 103, well, he's not going to be coming in today.' The closest you get is someone, usually under the age of thirty and thus prone to exaggeration, saying… 'Guess what *nearly* happened to me last night.'

Is it possible that whoever dispatches the rockets only dispatches them towards people whose friends and relatives aren't likely to make a fuss, or aren't likely to be noticed? If so, it's almost as if the War is cruelly and deliberately picking on the invisible. But more likely, at least in the eyes of those who tend to take the "time-active" idea too literally, is the possibility that the rockets don't just kill. They remove their victims entirely. Past, present and future.

Valentine tried explaining this to someone once, one of the less memorable crewmen in the rec room, keeping the tone light so he could always claim it was a joke if he started sounding too paranoid. Out of uniform, the man was wearing a blank baseball cap and a little Faction Paradox skull-badge on his sweatshirt.

'Yeah, but you'd still remember 'em,' the man said, once Valentine had explained the theory. 'Even if they got completely wiped out, yeah? You'd still remember 'em.'

‘No, but, you wouldn’t,’ said Valentine. ‘That’s the point. Their past would get wiped out as well. So nobody’d remember them.’

‘*I’d* remember them,’ the man maintained.

‘Err… how?’ Valentine asked.

“Cos I would,’ the man said. ‘I’d remember what they looked like.’

So there you go. Time-travel might have become part of the common parlance, but Valentine’s quite sure that most people still aren’t primed to think in terms of history. They do, however, know a good badge when they see one.

3.11 Wait…

…something important happened there, and it almost got lost. Wind that back.

The casualties of the War. *No schools yet, but we live in hope.*

That comes straight out of Valentine’s subconscious. He *hopes* that a school will be hit by rocket-fire. He *hopes* children will die, in a sudden act of violence (although technically the rocket attacks only ever come after nightfall, so this is unlikely), because he knows the extent to which it will turn the town against the War. Why is he against the War? Because it kills.

The cause is bigger than corpses. He’s prepared to see people die if it changes the way people think, and it’s a thought which worries him. It worries him because he’s never been sure how far he can take this line of thought. War, *any* war, is fought on that principle—that it’s reasonable to kill, even your own kind, for a supposed higher cause—but wars are decided by governments, or obscure powers of which mortals have no knowledge, and for *him* to weigh up the same options smacks of… amateurism. Then again, it’s a fact of life that a terrorist is just an amateur politician.

But how many lives are worth a great big cultural construct like “Ending the War”? Without life, the idea’s meaningless. Without the idea, life’s meaningless. So who’s carrying whom around here?

There are, incidentally, a great many children being killed by rocket attacks in other towns. Too far away, though. Nobody’s ever going to care about a thousand little ones being put to the torch a million miles away, not when there’s a dead fourteen-year-old right here, right now, with her torso punctured in eighteen places.

3.12 Tiffany’s Ride

It does seem like a very big coincidence, at least from the outside. When Tiffany saw the girl with the Faction mask at the tower block, there was a sense—just a brief and coked-up, hyper-sensitive sense—that the Executive was everywhere and knew exactly what she was doing. Less than an hour later, the same girl is in a van which very nearly hits her (Tiffany isn't sure whose fault it was, but she's inclined to blame herself simply because this isn't her natural environment) and damages her leg, something likely to disrupt the dance routines of "In the Loop" and "Hypnotised by You" but is otherwise tolerable.

Now the girl's mask is right here, in the van, next to the shredded mass of black leather that's the only surviving seat in the vehicle's rear half. A single, tiny bulb lights up the interior, making Tiffany feel as if she's in a refrigerator being hauled through the night on a very loud and very badly-rusted trolley—a sensation intensified by the smell of pre-packaged oriental sauce that's making her feel like a famine victim. A famine victim with remarkably healthy and well-toned calves.

Evidently, the insect is still hungry.

No, forget the food. There's the mask. It seems too casual, too well-placed. It could be whistling nonchalently through its snout, and you wouldn't be able to hear it over the engine noise.

Tiffany lets her eyes flick back up to the rear-view mirror, where they meet the eyes of the girl who apparently owns the mask, the goth with the scarlettine flecks in her hair. Embarrassingly, both she and Tiffany look away again at the same instant.

Is it possible that the Fa…

No.

That the *Executive* sent this girl here, to drag her back to the hotel no matter what?

Possible. But you tend to have a different view of conspiracy theory, if you've got an Executive to monitor your every emotion and to move the scenery around you to suit your needs. Of course *they're* watching your every move. *They're* also helping you to rehearse a lot of those moves and then broadcasting them to several billion people. What else are they there for?

Tiffany decides to test her suspicions, by starting a conversation which seems to fall within the limits of normal human intercourse, at least as she's observed it. It's all she can think of.

'So,' she says, addressing the well-built goth. 'D'you, uh… d'you think there's a *real* Faction Paradox?'

3.13 Inangela's Embarrassment

Not the kind of conversation Inangela was expecting from the DoppelTiffany. She would've banked on plenty of non-sequiturs, especially if the girl really is off her face on something, but not non-sequiturs so close to Inangela's own interests. She feels this opening gambit is overly personal, somehow. She's not sure why, since she's happy to walk down all but the roughest of streets in her ersatz Faction mask, but…

…a real Faction? The sad truth is, Inangela doesn't have a ready-made answer to that question. The *sadder* truth is that when DoppelTiffany asked her that, Inangela's first reaction was to shrug. Imagine that! A shrug. Not a witty, profound response. Not the kind of one-liner that would have made Buddha proud. Just a shrug.

In another version of history, Inangela followed up the shrug and filled the following awkward silence with, 'They're as real as you want them to be,' but Inangela's now absolutely sure this *didn't* take place and that Horror absolutely *didn't* smirk as a result. That would be too, too awful to consider. (Even apart from the banality of it, the grammar's wrong. "It," not "they," remember.)

Somewhere, Buddha must be laughing his little zen socks off.

Inangela's now engaged in a difficult, fragmented conversation with the wide-eyed passenger, exchanging comments after long pauses and trying to say something desperately insightful as a way of making up for the shrug. She's even tried steering DoppelTiffany into specific areas of discussion, in the hope of being able to say one of the many, many witty sentences she keeps in reserve for future use. No good so far.

She decides to try to get the passenger to become the stupid one. It makes her feel a little guilty, but guilt is better than embarrassment.

'Why do you ask, anyway?' she says. 'Only… it sounds like there's something on your mind.'

Hah. That should get her. A stoner will talk for hours, if she thinks that someone cares what's on her mind.

'Well…' begins DoppelTiffany.

3.14 Tiffany's Answer

There's something strange about the goth. She seems… curiously insightful. She acts as if she knows nothing about Faction Paradox, but has let slip at least one curiously profound statement about the

actuality of its existence, and knows there's something on Tiffany's mind.

Maybe this goth-girl can tell her something useful. Maybe she's closer to being an agent of Miss Ruth's than the Executive's. But how do you ask what you really want to ask? How do you explain about the Executive, about the doppelgangers?

Nevertheless, it's into the fray she goes.

'There are these, uh… guys I know,' she begins.

'Riiiight,' says the goth, prompting her to go on. Suddenly Tiffany feels like she's being analysed, and she wasn't expecting to need an analyst at least until age twenty-five.

'I kind of do what they tell me,' she goes on, then instantly realises how it sounds.

'Yeah, I had a boyfriend like that,' says the other girl, the one who's driving. The goth shushes her.

'Not like that,' says Tiffany. 'They just… run the show, y'know?'

'The show,' says the goth, nodding. Sounding deep.

'Yeah. And it's like I, uh… I don't know. If they're like I thought they were.'

'So you want your independence.'

'No! Yeah. Not like that. It's… they do care about me, yeah? They look after me.'

'Mm-hmm.'

'But it's like… I've got no way of knowing if it's this me they care about. 'Cause I've, kind of, *seen* things now. I've kind of… found out things. About me. And I don't know if, if they really know me. What's happening to me. You know?'

Long silence. If you can use the word "silence," with the van shaking itself apart from the bottom up as it tears down the empty road.

'And this is something to do with Faction Paradox because…?' probes the goth.

'S'kind of difficult,' admits Tiffany.

3.15 Sequitur, #1

One half of a 'phone conversation, which took place some weeks ago between an unspecified (but heavily monitored) location which may or may not lie somewhere in the town, and a four-room flat

overlooking a record shop near the town centre. This time it's the other side of the conversation, the side that wasn't recorded. But nonetheless. It went something like:

'Ahhh… Orphée.

'It's, ahhh… I wanted to check. About the, ahh. About everything. I wanted to check that everything's still… you know.

'And you can get the, the, the *parts*? What you said before, about…

'…yeah. Yeah. Look. I'm… I've looked at everything you gave me. It's not like there's a problem, but it's just… it's just, you know. It's a big thing. That's all.

'And you know that I haven't… l mean, I know how to put stuff together. I don't mean I *can't* do it. I just mean…

'And you're sure about the, the target? About the place…?

'No. I know it's *possible*. God knows I've been, I've been keeping track long enough.

'But… you couldn't have got this wrong?

'It couldn't have just been… you know. Just a rocket attack or…

'There's nothing else? Because… we don't know. We don't know what else might do that.

'Yeah, apart from a Ship. We don't know what War weapons *do*. Well… maybe you do. If there's something else that makes the same kind of crater when it -

'Uhh. I just… I went to the place, that's all. And there's, there's nothing there now. You can't see anything.

'I… yeah, okay. I just wanted to check. 'Cos I still don't know what kind of time we're talking about, and it's… I still don't know when you're going to be giving me all the, all the, all the things.

'I know. It's okay, I'm not… it's okay. I know you've got to be, err, careful. But I'm not used to this. That's all.

'Yeah. Well. I suppose… if everything's okay.

'If everything's going to go like you said.'

3.16 The Creature That Lives Under the Bed

Valentine's room isn't a large one, and the stacks of *matter* that line the walls (mostly, but not exclusively, in book form) don't do the space any favours. Nor does the lack of any kind of window, the lack

of any kind of cover on the lightbulb or the lack of any colour of paint on the walls apart from single-man white. All of these things give the impression that the room is taller than wide, like an Eastern European prison cell.

In fact this place isn't *so* bachelor-orientated as it might appear, as there's an entire pile of paperbacks by the bed which have one factor in common. They've all been brought into this room by ex-girlfriends, who've started reading them on the Morning After and who've left them here, nowhere near finished, on rushing to catch the bus home. Valentine feels it'd be impolite to move any of them, just in case.

Nothing has been added to this stack in quite a while. He's had other things on his mind recently.

He keeps the big, black, metal box under the bed itself, because it feels right to him that he should sleep on top of something so fundamental. The box itself already feels heavy, even as Valentine lifts up the edge of the bedsheet and pulls it out into whatever floor-space exists here.

Once he's dragged the box to the bedroom door, he flips the catch and lifts up the lid and checks that everything's just as he left it. The hinges squeal like they're being led to slaughter and the rust rubs off on his fingers, and inside things aren't any sleeker or shinier. Crude pieces of metal, soldered into place with far less precision than one might expect from a device of this nature, looking even cruder than usual in the bulb-light. You'd hope for a better Ark of the Covenant.

There are other items he'll need, some of them supplied by the Faction, some of them nonchalantly bought from retail suppliers, all of them kept under the same bed. Most crucial of all is the padded, air-tight bag, to which Valentine—not a seamstress by nature—has made certain careful adjustments of his own. Which should, if he's understood this correctly, allow him to remove the Red Uranium from its containers and insert it into the bomb-box without exposing himself or the air around him to voodoo-radiation.

This is the theory. The theoretical version of tonight's events, however, assumes that Valentine hasn't already been exposed to Red Uranium in the back of the car of death.

3.17 Media Sense

It's at this point, appropriately enough, that Valentine senses the atmosphere changing in the room. It's his media-sense again, nothing more. He's a child of the modern age even if he's no Tiffany Korta. Anyone under forty can tell when a television's been switched on in

their vicinity, even if they've got their back to it, because they know what the skin-prickle feels like. Anyone under thirty can tell when that television changes channel, from those sudden little shifts in the frequency of the air, and though Valentine's senses aren't as highly-tuned as some he's sensitive enough tonight.

His skin's already buzzing, on the alert for interference. So he knows the channel's been changed, despite the fact that the TV's in another room.

Which is strange, because as far as he knows he's the only one in the flat. Isn't that something? In the old days, you'd know if someone had broken into your home because you'd hear the creaking of a floorboard or the sound of furniture being knocked over. But someone's switching channels while he's getting ready to build a nuclear device, and that comes as a shock to his system for all sorts of reasons.

3.18 Inangela's Interrogation

This celebrity lookalike is confused and clearly paranoid. Bonehead psychology tells Inangela she sees herself as the star of some kind of show—which is at least understandable. Inangela, as a child, couldn't escape the sensation that she was the lead character in a TV series of some kind (though even at twelve she stopped short of imagining what the hyper-dimensional viewers might look like). Let's face it, anyone brought up in a TV-heavy culture is likely to feel they're being watched at least half of the time, just because it removes the horrible feeling that nobody will be there to see your greatest, cleverest, bravest and wittiest moments. The other half of the time it's better that nobody's there to see you mess up.

Inangela now feels she's in a position to ask DoppelTiffany the main question.

'So… what did you get from Miss Ruth?'

DoppelTiffany goes quiet again. She's good with sporadic pauses.

'I've gotta face it,' she says.

Helloooo. Now it's getting interesting. Face it? Face what? Face the Beast. Inangela knows this routine, like any good ritualist. It's your basic initiation. She's been through it herself many, many times. Some of her initiations have been long, complicated and painful, such as the one which led her here. Some of them have been shorter and simpler, and in retrospect may not have been initiations at all. She has to admit, for example, that the time she drank two-thirds of a bottle of Horror's vodka and retched up most of her stomach was not, as she

believed at the time, a method of passing the first gates of Shaktyanda.

So now it's this confused young lady's dark night of the soul, and what do you know, she's ended up on the same road as Inangela. Well, that's hardly surprising. They're all locked inside the ritual pattern now. And mysticism breeds mysticism.

Of course, Inangela can't let the girl's own problems get in the way of the mission. But as a ritualist who obviously knows more than any stoner, it's only right that she should help.

'Tell me more,' she says.

3.19 The Truth About the Dead

The living-room is, according to the six mundane senses, just as Valentine left it. Still no decent light in here. Nor is there any sound, except the low background noise of *The Muppet Show* on BBX.

BBX shows this kind of stuff all the time, sometimes repeating the same episodes four or five times a night, with discrete hour-long gaps between what they euphemistically call "performances." Valentine tries to remember whether he left the TV tuned to BBX when he left the room, but he really has no idea.

He's sure, absolutely sure, he can still feel it. The frequency's changed. *Something* on the edge of his seventh sense has changed. He remembers, dimly, old folk-stories about people who visit the land of the fairies and return with the ability to see and hear fairies everywhere, so much so that the rest of the world treats them as lunatics. He wonders if the same thing applies to the Land of the Dead, whether he's now personally tuned in to the Dead Man's Channel and only he can pick it up.

It's an idle thought, of course, but even so he physically jumps when he sees the face of the guest star on *The Muppet Show*. It looks, for all the world, like George Orwell—a similarity reinforced by the fact that the man's surrounded by Muppet farmyard animals, some more equal than others. Since George Orwell on a '70s TV programme is impossible, the conclusion is that Valentine's seeing ghosts on the television. It takes him a few seconds to realise that the man isn't Orwell at all, just some old-time Hollywood actor, with a thick New England accent and a pencil-thin moustache. But the likeness is striking, at least if you've got a pumped-up bloodstream and dead people on your mind.

Nevertheless, the sight of an impossible celebrity on television has affected him far more than the experience of getting the bomb ready,

something which makes him feel a little embarrassed, and he wonders if this is a normal part of the terrorist psyche. In fact his blood is now so full of panic, adrenaline and other things besides that he's absolutely *sure* his seventh sense is trying to tell him something.

3.20 Tiffany's Guru

So Tiffany tells the goth everything the goth wants to hear, at least in her own limited, censored fashion. She tries to explain, as best she can, that she went to Miss Ruth to try to find the essence of the "real her" (the goth refers to Tiffany's other iterations as "other girls" in the employ of the Executive, which proves that the goth understands). She tries to explain that instead of finding a tiny nugget of her true self, she saw that her true self is not only immense but seemingly infinitely flexible (this causes the goth to go 'mmm,' so obviously the goth isn't here just to give her all the answers). She tries to explain, or at the very least imply, that her Executive may not understand exactly how fast she's growing (the goth refers to the Executive as "the Beast" in this context, which scares her a little but she can deal).

And she doesn't even need to explain that the Executive is now the only thing holding her back, what Miss Ruth called her one last link to the Pit. The goth knew that instinctively, even before Tiffany realised she felt that way.

'Where is it, then?' asks the goth.

'Where's… what?' says Tiffany.

'She means the Beast,' says the other girl, the driver with the tattoo of the muskrat (?) on her arm.

'Oh, right,' says Tiffany. 'Well… back at the hotel, I guess. There's, like… seven of them? And Nod and Danzael, who're different.'

'Ahhh,' says the goth, just like a shrink would. 'So you're not talking about *one* thing. Only you said "it" when you were talking about it before—'

'It's got lots of people in it, though,' Tiffany explains.

'Ahhhh,' says the driver, but it sounds like she's just taking the piss out of her friend.

The goth is unabashed. 'Okay, then it's a metaphorical Beast. Not a single… beast Beast.'

Tiffany shifts in her seat a little. 'Guess so.'

This reply is a carefully-calculated one. She knows it can't be committal either way (she's highly-skilled at giving non-committal answers, since so many interviewers insist on asking her about things

like the War), and she knows she has to be able to deny that she said anything much at a later date.

'Then you've got to find somewhere you can have a showdown,' the goth tells her.

'Er… showdown?' This is starting to sound dangerous. Tiffany guesses that lawyers will be involved, and the lawyers are presumably on the Executive's side.

Unless the girl means a *real* showdown, with guns and…?

No, couldn't be.

'So where… where should I have this showdown?' she asks.

The goth shrugs, confidently this time. 'Find a place. That's what I do. Find a place that's got the right vibes to be a—'

'Bet you can't finish this without saying "ritual",' her friend cuts in.

'—good ceremonial site,' the goth goes on, unbowed. 'Somewhere that's got the right… you know… *significance*.'

'Yeah,' says her friend. 'Like that crater where you nearly killed yourself.'

The goth gives her a cold, cold look.

'Right,' says Tiffany, trying to piece this all together. 'And… how do I do that?'

The goth leans forward in her seat. From back here in the rear section of the van, she looks to Tiffany like a great mass of black leather and heavy ornamentation, bigger than anyone who's allowed to exist (at least in front of the cameras) in Tiffany's world. The girl plucks something off the dashboard, and casually throws it over her shoulder. It lands in the back, right next to Tiffany and right next to the Faction mask.

It's a book, the cover stained with rings of dark soy sauce, every page in some way mauled, folded or marked.

'A to Z,' says the goth.

But giving an A to Z to someone with no sense of geography is perverse at best, cruel at worst.

3.21 Making Fun of Distance

Let's not overdo this "no sense of geography" thing. Tiffany knows what maps are. You just wouldn't trust her to navigate. In recent memory she hasn't had much need to operate an A to Z, so although she soon works out the basic principles of page numbers and grid

references it takes her a while to reach the conclusion which other people would, perhaps, have reached quite quickly.

'Some of the pages have been torn out,' she says.

'Maybe,' says the goth, sniffily.

'They're in a car park,' says the driver.

'Okay,' says Tiffany, fast reaching the conclusion that this doesn't matter (see how fast she learns about the real world). 'And, what am I supposed to do with this?'

'Pick a site,' says the goth. 'Anywhere you like. Got to be the right place, though.'

Now Tiffany's *really* paranoid. Paranoid that she's the stupid one here, natch. 'Uh. How do I know…?'

'You should just *know*,' says the goth. 'Trust me.'

'She doesn't know,' her friend mumbles.

'Yes she does,' says the goth.

'No, I really don't,' says Tiffany. Quite bravely, really.

'Hmm.' The goth doesn't sound as if she believes it, and Tiffany wonders if one of the other Tiffany iterations is the one that somehow ended up with the relevant knowledge. 'All right. What's your favourite number?'

'Uhhh… eighteen?' Tiffany suggests, not sure whether she's given the right answer. She remembers reading a "pop fact" box in a magazine once which claimed that eighteen was her favourite number.

'Fine. Turn to page eighteen.'

Tiffany tries to do this, but fails, since page eighteen is missing. The goth advises her to try the nearest even-numbered page, which turns out to be twenty-two, and this pleases the girl as apparently twenty-two is a 'big number.'

'Now spit at it,' says the goth.

'I'm sorry?' says Tiffany.

'Urrr,' says the driver, but even Tiffany can tell there's some hypocrisy there and that the driver does far, far worse all the time.

'Spit,' the goth demands. 'At the page. You know how nobody ever wants to drink they're own spit once they've spat it? Even though it's only got their own germs in it?'

'Yes,' lies Tiffany.

'When the spit's in your mouth, it's part of you. You spit it out, it

turns into something else. Make it something else. Spit at the page.'

And lo, Tiffany spits, all the time imagining that tomorrow's headline in the Sun will be DIRTY TIFF SPITS AT MAPS.

If only.

3.22 Authority

Cautiously, Valentine moves over to the window—it's what his instincts are telling him to do. Maybe his seventh sense has tracked down the source of the disturbance. Maybe it knows how to triangulate.

Outside the window, on the street opposite the record emporium, there's a van parked with as many of its wheels up on the pavement as possible. It's a strange sight, in itself. This is supposedly one of the town's busiest arteries, and there's no official parking outside Valentine's flat, day or night. The van is silver, not black, but the street-light bounces straight off the windscreen and makes the van's occupants (should there be any) as invisible as the driver of the Black Man's carriage.

Nobody gets out of the van, and none of the occasional passers-by pay it any attention at all. But Valentine's seventh sense is still on the alert, and he knows how ridiculous that sounds even as he thinks it. He wonders if he's picking up some kind of signal from the van itself, so obviously, now he's imagining it being full of machines and monitors and transmitter-dishes.

But his link to the Faction is supposed to be untraceable. Who'd be able to see the patterns in everything he's done, the link between the "borrowed" ambulance and the Tiffany Korta performance and a crashed Ship? A pattern which, to the outside world, would surely seem as incomprehensible as the War itself?

3.23 The Pace

Another commercial break. That explains the noise you can hear behind Valentine as he realises who's closing in on him, the hi-tempo hi-energy sound of collapsing synth-drums and chopped-up guitar riffs.

The advert is for a computer game console, and if Valentine were looking at the screen, he'd see a fifteen-year-old boy, strapped into a leather chair in the kind of neo-industrial semi-robotic world that's been TV shorthand for "cool"—at least, ever since that terrible movie about the time-travelling cyborg in the leather jacket.

The boy, according to this advertisement's plot, is being used by evil machine-scientists to test the "Xtreme Factor" of the console. His eyes are fixed on the screen in front of him, and the camera alternates between the boy's face and high-speed clips of the games he's playing. Both the clips and the soundtrack get faster as the ad rolls on and the scientists register higher and higher Xtreme Factors from their experimental subject.

Then things become more intense. The machines that surround the boy go berserk, driven insane by his pathological need for faster and faster game-software. The devices which keep his arms in place suddenly click, turn and twist, moulding themselves to the boy's arms. His hands, already darting across the controls at speeds that no middle-aged viewer could match, become superhuman. While the scientists' readings go off the scale, the crown of needles around the boy's head fully extends into his skin (this advert, it's fair to say, is designed to provoke some consternation among parents) and injects him with cybernetic acupuncture. The boy's face becomes half-human and half-machine, and from his triumphant, chrome-laced expression the truth becomes clear. He *wanted* this. By absorbing the machinery around him, he's become better, faster and a champion at the game.

As the scientist's readout-screens explode, showering the men with glass and smoke, the tag-line of the commercial appears on screen. HOW WILL *YOU* COPE WITH THE PACE?

Underneath it all, if you can ignore the pictures and see the pulse, the message is the same one delivered by everyone from game-makers to chocolate manufacturers: ADDICTION IS A GREAT THING.

Valentine doesn't see any of this, but he hears the music, gradually accelerating as the boy in the chair turns himself into something smoother, slicker and more product-dependant. The rhythm speeds up all the time, and his heartbeat speeds up with it, the need to *move* building with every second until his body just can't stay still any more. Maybe this is what the ride in the Black Man's carriage was priming him for. His body knows he has to do something, and there's only one thing he can do. What's more, as his blood gets faster his skin becomes more sensitive, and his seventh sense tells him that whatever changed in the atmosphere… it's not over yet.

The advert explodes into a haze of white light and a corporate logo. It bursts through every nerve in Valentine's body. He turns from the window, and starts to run, hurtling towards the door of the room and the door of the flat.

3.24 Inangela's "Ahhhh"

‘Stratton Row,’ says Inangela. ‘Have we ever been there?’

One grunt from Horror means “yes.” (Two, logically, means “nuh-uh.”)

Stratton Row is where the spit lies, more or less. It’s out of the way of Inangela’s proposed route to the next point of the pentagram, but not *too* far out of the way, especially as she’s performing a sacred duty here. So they can drop DoppelTiffany off, hopefully without Horror asking who’s going to pay for the petrol. Actually the exact position of DoppelTiffany’s saliva indicates a field, but Stratton Row is presumably the nearest the van can get without running over cows or destroying someone’s rugby pitch or something. According to Horror it’s only a couple of minutes away, though Horror’s timescale is not like other people’s.

‘You set this up, didn’t you?’ Horror asks, unexpectedly.

‘Mmm?’ thinks Inangela, then decides to say it.

‘Never mind,’ says Horror.

‘Hold on,’ says the voice from the back of the van.

Inangela glances at the reflection of the passenger. The girl’s staring at the A to Z and frowning… well, not exactly frowning, she’s too MTV for that. Looking concerned.

‘The hotel,’ says the girl. Then she stares up from the book, with her eyes flashing like headlamps again. ‘How… big is this?’

She holds up the A to Z as she says it, making Inangela wonder just how distorted her perceptions are. Then it clicks. ‘You mean, what scale is it?’

‘Uh-huh. ‘Cause… this field, it’s on the same page as the hotel.’

‘*Your* hotel?’

A pause. ‘The hotel. Yeah.’

‘Ahhhh,’ says Inangela.

‘I *knew* you were going to do that,’ says Horror.

3.25 The Beast

Even as Valentine runs, he knows he’s not going to be alone for long. Something has just channelled itself into the building. Something is already here.

There’s no point waiting for the lift. The mechanism’s suspect at the best of times, and besides, Valentine isn’t sure he could stop moving even if he thought it was a good idea. He doesn’t know what

“channelling” really means, but right know he can feel it running through the whole building.

The War-time powers are making their presence felt. Valentine has no idea what that really means. For all he knows, this is what people caught up in rocket attacks feel just before they’re burned off the surface of the world. For all he knows the higher forces aren’t sending their agents here at all, and the whole building’s about to be neatly cauterised.

Thankfully, nobody else is around as Valentine throws himself down the first set of stairs. His movements are awkward, mostly because of the weight of the metal box in his hands. Yes: he brought the box even though he knows the weight of it could slow him down and kill him (even if the Red Uranium doesn’t). He reaches the next landing, stumbles, shifts his weight as best he can and turns the corner to head down the second staircase.

It’s waiting for him on the next landing down. Looking up at him. Electric light turning its eyes into mirrors. Deadly still in the middle of the stairwell, with its back hunched behind its head and its muscles pulled tight, bloated and visceral even if it’s curled itself into the smallest space it can manage.

“Agents” of the War-time powers.

Strange, really. Valentine was always expecting men, in suits and shirts and maybe even sunglasses. Not this animal, this… well… this Dog of War, this huge, muscular creature that looks as if it blinked into existence right here on the stairs. Here, with the strip-light bouncing off the paint, the animal’s skin seems faintly green—there’s that whiff of phosphorous, the smack of the chemical. *And there on the moor, Mr. Holmes, was the most monstrous hound you have ever laid your eyes upon!*

Valentine isn’t moving. Neither is the animal. It doesn’t even growl, as it lowers its head and flicks back its ears and turns its skull into a bullet. It knows its prey isn’t worth intimidating. Under the thick, hairless hide, its oversized muscles barely even twitch, so that one single flex of a nerve could unleash all the kinetic energy in its body and fire it up the twelve steps that separate it from Valentine.

It’s only a matter of time before it gets the order, Valentine knows that instinctively. Just as he knows, beyond any sense of uncertainty, that the Dog of War isn’t alone. The rest of the pack is already channelling in.

3.26 The Hunt

Dogs. They've adapted well to this urban mythology. They can be bred and trained for hunting, the same way they can be bred for carrying explosives under the axles of enemy vehicles or for snorting out narcotics. Valentine's part of the War now, so the dogs he sees are huge, vicious, military things, reared and force-bred in a War environment.

It occurs to him, coming face-to-face with this bright-eyed monster, that only his journey to the Land of the Dead enables him to see it. This breed is a subtle breed, despite its size and savagery. It moves at angles to the rest of the world and only hunts at night. Give them any environment, a modern one full of cineplexes and subway tunnels or an impossible one of Ships of War and time-travel. The dogs will make themselves known there, finding a way into the world's subconscious.

Valentine has never seen an animal this large, at least not in the flesh, at least not in town. But it belongs here. Easy to see how this building could have received it so easily. Although, in all honesty, what he's feeling now is the obligatory primal terror rather than anything more philosophical. Beyond the dog there's one more stairway, one more turning and a dozen more steps before the building's foyer. If he moved his head right now—if he could even contemplate breaking eye-contact—then he could look down over the banister on the landing and see the ground floor of the building, the black-and-bleach-white tiles on the floor of the lobby. One more stairway, that's all.

There's certainly no moment of conscious decision as Valentine's muscles all flinch at once, and he throws himself at the banister, hurling the metal box over the edge of the landing before hurling himself after it. The animal, not being a creature of logic, doesn't think to try to intercept him on the ground. It launches itself up the stairway as soon as he starts to move, its great, heavy feet barely touching the steps below it. It opens its mouth wide, and the space between its jaws becomes as big as the world, before Valentine starts to fall those last twenty feet to ground level.

3.27 Why Impossible…?

Time-travel is impossible because it makes the impossible far, far too easy. Banal, even. If you thought temporal paradoxes were dull in the stories, then just wait until you can't move for creating them. In a universe of time-travel, everything becomes a relic; relics lose their meaning; meaning becomes worthless.

You know the story. Everybody knows the story, and yet barely anybody sees the two huge-yet-possible flaws in it. You take a family

heirloom, any heirloom, say something passed down by your grandfather. You take it back in time and you give it to your grandfather when he was a child, so he can pass it down to you. Where does the heirloom come from, who makes it in the first place, insoluble conundrum, yaddah yaddah yaddah, God in Heaven even pointing out that it's tedious is tedious. (Metacliché: something so drab that it can't even be safely deconstructed any more.)

But:

1. To Hell with "heirloom." It doesn't have to be anything so important. You can pick up a chocolate wrapper out of the gutter, take it back five minutes and leave it where you found it, and you get the same effect. Can you imagine that? A chocolate wrapper. And it's not worth pretending that time wouldn't allow it, that a paradoxical object simply wouldn't exist. What's the universe going to do? Remove all the chocolate wrappers you might ever find?

And:

2. We're primed to think that any object, whether it's a relic or rubbish, has a holy integrity of its own. It doesn't. A chocolate wrapper isn't indestructible, it's as prone to entropy as the rest of us. When you pick up that chocolate wrapper, the friction of your fingers against its surface will knock a few atoms off its mass. Not many. Not enough to be visible. But you'll make it smaller than it was when it was put in the gutter. Then you'll go back five minutes and put it in the gutter, which means that when you pick it up it will—by definition—be smaller than it is when you pick it up. So when you pick it up it'll be infinitely small, which means that when you first find it it's infinitely large. An infinitely large chocolate wrapper, who would have thought it?

That's the thing, you see. Point 2 tells you that the whole idea is infinitely stupid, and Point 1 tells you that it's impossible to stop it anyway, if you can time-travel. Anyone who claims that time will somehow sort things out is an idiot. Time doesn't know what a chocolate wrapper is, let alone recognise the problem of a potentially infinite number of them all being infinitely large.

This is why nobody believes in time-travel, in this universe. Nobody except the archons of Faction Paradox, who must see it as their duty to resist the entropy, to get as close to the impossible as possible without making it ordinary.

3.28 One...

He can barely run. He doesn't think he's broken anything, although

as a qualified ambulance crewman he's aware that most people who don't "think" they've broken anything have shattered spines and most people who "think" they've broken something are just sprained. But what he's feeling now says *shock*, not fracture.

All he remembers is sliding like a drunk across the foyer floor, almost toppling over again as he tried to pick up the metal box and run at the same time. He remembers lurching towards the side-door of the foyer, towards the corridor where the caretaker's office is, then slamming the door behind him as if a door with a glass panel could keep out a heavy muscled animal with ribs like knives.

He can still hear the noise. The barking, if you can call it that. The near-ultra-sonic *thump* as every sound the animal makes shakes the paint from the stairwell walls. Right now Valentine's body has already put down the box and thrown open the door of the supply cupboard in the bare bulb-light of the corridor. It's where the caretaker keeps the buckets and the shovels, the chemicals used to clean out the foyer and the tools used to scrape the sick off the lift doors. Valentine's emptying out the cupboard now, throwing the mops out into the passage and scrabbling at the plastic bottles, until he finds what he's looking for.

There's a kind of logic, in Valentine's decision to hide the plastic explosive here in the supply cupboard. Where anyone *could* find it, but nobody would recognise it: where anybody *could* steal it, but wouldn't know it from the caretaker's dozen other chemicals and compounds. You can see how he wouldn't want to keep the explosive in his own flat. It may not be nuclear, but for all he knows "unstable" means "will detonate if you watch too much television in its presence." No… it goes deeper than that. If he'd kept the explosive in his flat, then he'd be *admitting* something, true? Even apart from the fact that the police could find it there, and prove he really *was* an enemy of some state or other.

If he'd kept it in his flat, there'd be no denying what he is.

But there's no doubt now. Right now, as Valentine uncovers it, it's just an ugly green-grey putty lump in a painfully transparent plastic bag, with a "Caution: do not ingest" sticker attached as an extra layer of camouflage. Even as he scoops it up—and even more so when he slides it under the box lid, wildly assuming it won't go off if he carries it in both hands—he knows it's the putty's day to shine.

There are feet trying to get a grip on a newly-polished surface. There are claws scratching at the tiles of the foyer, almost breaking against the cold, hard floor under the animal's weight. Valentine takes the box in both hands and runs for the rear exit, on his poor little

shell-shocked calves and thighs.

The air, when it hits Valentine full in the face, is very nearly a shock. Valentine feels the sweat start to cool on his body even as he stumbles out onto the concrete…

3.29 …Two…

The *second* Dog of War therefore comes as a surprise. He only registers it when it's almost on top of him, bounding out of the dark with its mouth wide open and a sound coming out of its throat so loud and so hurt, you'd think it started in another century, that the dog's been waiting for this moment as long as it's had this huge, muscle-bloated body and that it's been screaming in agony ever since it died in its previous life as a *real* dog.

All of which assumes, of course, this is indeed a second animal and not a relocated version of the first one. It's hard to know how these things work, but this one definitely seems a little smaller, so either it's another dog or the first one lost some mass in teleporting from place to place.

What's worse is that Valentine is still stumbling forward, towards its mouth. There's a single paper-thin moment in time in which he feels the breath on its face and swears he can see into the War itself as he looks down its gullet.

Both of his hands swing forward, instinctively putting the box between himself and the animal's snout. What happens next isn't exactly what you'd call *inspiration*, but there must be a moment when his nerves work out what'll happen if they keep the movement going…

3.30 …Three

The edge of the box, hard and heavy and as sharp as you like, swings up into the dog's jaw with most of Valentine's weight behind it. The size of the animal is suddenly unimportant. The metal cuts into the phosphor-green of the skin, all the way through the flesh and into the bone under its skull. The hundred-year-old scream stops instantly. Momentum keeps the animal moving forward, but its head snaps back as it bites through its tongue, and Valentine's got no choice but to stumble sideways as the dog starts to drop to the ground.

There's a moment when they touch, when he can feel the short fur on its shoulder and the muscle underneath. The dog's bulk hitting the pavement, then sliding forward onto its front legs, obviously in pain.

The second blow from the box is a conscious one. Valentine aims it deliberately, as soon as he's recovered his posture, even though he's starting to remember there's plastic explosive inside. He may only have seconds to weigh up the options, but nonetheless it's a wilful, calculated move when he stumbles over to the animal's fallen body and cracks open the side of its head.

The ambulance is parked in the street off to one side of the building, out of the glare of the main street. Which is fortunate. It wouldn't make the best possible tableaux, this sight of a man in the overalls of life-saver, dragging himself towards his vehicle with a box that looks for all the world like stolen properly. A dead dog lying in the street-light behind him, its head crushed against the pavement, its body as hard and as heavy as a sphinx.

Valentine, like most of humanity, sees animals as *implicate* people, not as human beings per se, but as stripped-down, abstract versions of human beings. You can look into an animal's eyes and see any emotion or any kind of nobility or any character defect you like. Which must be why totems are always so popular. You can tell how someone's going to treat people by the way they treat animals, and that's why Valentine's always felt the guilt-pull of vegetarianism even though he knows he could never, ever give up his relationship with fried chicken (because it's hard to care about all those birds and animals in slaughterhouses, just as it's hard to care about all those War fatalities you don't know personally… at least Valentine likes to believe he tries).

The Dog of War is the first thing he's ever killed, bigger than insect-size. The fact that it was a necessity of the War isn't much of a comfort. It's all dreadfully symbolic, really. The black box he lays down at his feet, as he reaches the rear doors of the ambulance and starts to look for his keys, has claimed its first victim. *He's* claimed his first victim. Does he feel worse about the dog than he does about his potential future victims because he saw the dog face-to-mouth, while the others will always be unknown to him? Or because an animal, with its implicate-personality, will always seem slightly better at being human? Better, in fact, than anything else in the world.

Correction: almost anything else in the world. Valentine has just opened the ambulance doors, and only now does he remember the girl in the mask, lying exactly where he left her nearly four hours after being wounded. In her big-eyed, cartoon-faced, almost child-like mask, she isn't exactly human either.

And Valentine thought the dog was his first kill.

3.31 The Centre of Time

It's not a field any more.

Inangela sees the barrier as soon as they make the turning out of Stratton Row, as soon as they break free of the suburbs and grind their way through the dirt-roads towards the open ground. At first, she isn't sure what it is. The sky's still dark, but at this time of the morning the barrier's darker, a block of solid black against the tarmac-grey of the morning. As the van gets closer she can see that although from a distance it looks like a great, wide rectangle, in fact it's a ring, a wall that surrounds one big patch of the grassland. Closer still, and she can see that the barrier's made up of sections, plates of God-knows-what that must be all of five yards tall and five yards wide. There's light in the slits between the sections, irregular and tinted green, pulsing with a complicated rhythm. It looks like somebody's having a party inside the ring. The same electrical glow is visible as a halo just above the barrier, pre-empting the dawn.

It reminds her of the big monster-proof wall in *King Kong*. She's not the first to make the connection in the last few hours.

'What's *this* supposed to be?' she asks.

'S'where they have the festival,' says Horror, sounding not at all interested in the phenomenon.

'Oh, *God*,' comes the voice from the back of the van.

This time, Inangela turns around rather than looking at the girl in the rear-view mirror. She can't help it. It sounds like the poor creature's about to be sick.

DoppelTiffany is now on her knees, right behind the two front seats, staring straight through the windscreen and at the field ahead of them. She no longer looks world-weary. The barrier surprises her. Some primal memory, thinks Inangela, of the environment where her kind evolved. It reminds her of the raves of her ancestors.

'This is where I started,' breathes the girl, adding weight to Inangela's theory.

And who says you can't go home again?

But now DoppelTiffany looks her dead in the eye, apparently anxious that Inangela isn't getting it. 'The performance,' she says. 'This is where it was. Tonight. *Last* night. Like… where it's going to be. Tomorrow.'

Humm. Thinks she's in all times at once. Typical. Oddly, though, Horror seems unusually interested as the van draws closer. Inangela

sees her eyes narrow as she looks at the girl's rear-view reflection, as if she's just figured something out.

'How did you know?' squeaks the girl. 'How did the *spit* know? How did it end up being here?'

3.32 Chance

A fair question. The circumstances seem unlikely. This town, though in no way important or significant to the culture-in-general, is not small in physical terms. Out of the whole of the local A to Z, it's certainly remarkable that Tiffany's spittle (which would, needless to say, net high prices on certain unscrupulous auction sites) should lead her right back to the arena where all of this started.

But probability is a complex thing. It's worth remembering that Tiffany *didn't* choose page twenty-two: she chose page eighteen, and only Inangela's sabotage of the book led them here at all. Probability made it much more likely that the page with the arena-field should be chosen, since the fields are the least likely to be removed from the volume comprising Inangela's pentagram-map. The rules of publishing dictate that the close-up map of the fields will have the largest (and therefore most arena-prone) field near the centre of the page, given that it's traditionally the site of the one event for which this town's known.

Meanwhile human psychology dictates that if you're spitting at a map then you're more likely to focus on an open space rather than on a cluster of streets, the same instinct which makes babies aim for their mothers' nipples and grown men shoot guns at colourful nipple-shaped targets.

So it's an acceptable level of coincidence. Unless you'd care to believe that this particular system of thought—the one which currently spans the town, with particular reference to Inangela, and Tiffany, and Valentine—intersects with the laws of psychology *and* publishing *and* ritual.

3.33 Putting Things Together

The box. The plastic explosive. Two halves of a critical mass. For the first time, all the elements are in the same place. All here in the back of the ambulance.

There's really only one thing he can do, isn't there? It's not as if he can drive back to the hospital with a half-corpse and the ingredients of a nuclear device, or go back to his flat and hope somebody calls off

the dogs when they see him being good and placid in front of the TV again. He doesn't even entertain the idea of calling the Faction for advice, at least not for more than, ooh, twelve seconds. His body's forced him to hold on this long. If there's *any* way out—if, indeed, he really wants out—then he has to keep going.

The tools for handling the Red Uranium are back inside the flat. Along with at least one Dog of War. To open the two canisters and handle the material inside, without any kind of protection, would be ludicrous. Assuming you hadn't already been exposed to the material, and assuming you were banking on living through this anyway.

When he unscrews the cap of the first container, it's yet another Rubicon crossed, another moment of A to B to C. Even Valentine's prickling, sweat-sensitive skin can't feel it, but the radiation's here inside the ambulance now. The girl in the mask, if she somehow survives everything else, isn't going to have a way back from this.

Yet somehow Valentine still can't escape the ridiculous feeling that she's there to encourage him, not to stop him. Obsession's like that.

3.34 'I Don't Believe in Nuclear Weapons…'

As you can imagine, Valentine used to hear that a lot. Anybody even remotely left-wing used to say it, back in the days when there was meant to be a long-term War which *didn't* directly intersect with the real world. Oh, let's be honest, he must have said it a lot himself when he was younger.

'I don't believe in nuclear weapons.' To which the obvious comedy answer is: 'Oh, they exist! I've seen them!' ("Seen" in the sense of… how shall we put it? Not "seen" in the flesh, in this case not even "seen" on TV. The hundreds of thousands of men, women and children burned into grey ash by that great double-act of the Fat Man and the Little Boy didn't leave much to look at, and it's not as if there were even any cameras on the blast sites. We know they're there, that's all. It's an instinctive kind of seeing that hasn't existed for long.)

There's a story, which Valentine heard when he was very very small. The story says that every time you say you don't believe in fairies, a fairy dies. It's one of many stories that seems to be scaring children into keeping their big mouths shut, or maybe trying to warn them that talk can blow whole chunks out of the world without anybody ever realising it.

'I don't believe in nuclear weapons.' Every time you say that, does a

nuclear weapon cease to exist? In Valentine's (not entirely straight-faced) version of the story, there are armies of government-sponsored operatives who lurk around the corners wherever the politically opinionated gather, ready to pounce if anybody starts a sentence 'I don't believe….' After all, so many things might cease to exist that way.

There's a similar story, this time with Indian roots, which claims that if you speak the name of Shiva then Shiva's third annihilating eye opens just that little bit more. And that logically, when the eye's fully open it'll behold the world and the world will burn in the fury of its gaze. Valentine's only dimly aware of this legend, but there are curious undertones of it in the way he sees the War, and it's got a nicely catastrophic ring which suits his way of thinking.

What happens if somebody on television says "Shiva"? Does that count as one twitch of the eyelid, or one for every speaker in every home that watches?

What if it's only written down?

What if it's transmitted over the Internet?

What if it's published?

3.35 Being There

Tiffany steps out of the big ugly van, *drops* out of the big ugly van, hitting the road so heavily that her bad knee comes close to snapping open. She barely notices. She doesn't take her eyes off the arena ahead of her.

Six hours ago, she was driven to this place. Waved through the entrance, the big gap in the barrier, in a private car. Then it made sense. It was night. Proper night. The arena looked *right* at night, filled with light and filled with people, serving its proper function in the world. Warm and self-enclosed.

Now it leaks. The sky's turning grey instead of black, and the green glow from inside the arena is bleeding into it. It's not an environment any more. It doesn't have its own rhythm of carefully-monitored electricity and carefully-regulated people-noise. It throbs, now. Throbs like… well, like a sprained knee. In spectator-free silence.

Why does it look so different?

Tiffany knows the answer, sort of. The arena looks different because she had to *come* here. Before, this was just a scene, a site on her agenda: the Executive put her here, where the stage was, and she never even had a sense of its relationship to the rest of the world. Now

she has some grasp of it, of the context, of the environment. She has some sense of the geographical world in which most of her audience exists, and can't help feeling that it's her place to free them from it.

All great stories are initiation stories. This is the one reliable thing Tiffany's learned from Hollywood. She steps forward, away from the road, onto the worn grass of the field and towards the barrier. She doesn't look back as she goes. She knows she's expected to take it from here, alone.

3.36 And:

Inangela wriggles out onto the pavement, and slams the passenger door of the van behind her (the only way it can possibly be closed, as it happens). She leans against the metal as she watches the passenger walk away, like a zombie with unusually lithe hip movements, towards the rave-light up ahead.

'She could have said thanks,' Inangela points out.

3.37 Cinematic Footnote (1)

Tiffany's favourite film, incidentally, is *The Seven-Year Itch*. Marilyn Monroe fascinates her. It's the pop star's prerogative.

Everybody knows that the archons of Faction Paradox, the *real* archons of Faction Paradox, use what they call "sympathetic friction"—they use icons and fetishes, they manipulate people through their video images, they capture the identity and re-work it from every conceivable angle (physical and conceptual). What you do to someone's image affects them directly, and Tiffany has direct experience of that.

Marilyn Monroe, at one point the world's greatest sex symbol. Her image, seen or just imagined, used twenty-million times every day. Mostly by men, mostly for obvious reasons, and most of those fantasies weren't exactly gentle. Each one impacting on the woman herself, on both her "real" body (because that was the 1960s, and Tiffany knows that things were simpler then, when celebrities had better-defined "real" bodies) or on her uber-form.

Imagine that. Being raped twenty-million times a day.

No wonder she killed herself.

One day, thinks Tiffany, twenty-million men might fantasise over my image at once. If they love me, the orgasm will probably kill me. If not then I'll be torn to pieces.

3.38 Cinematic Footnote (2)

Valentine's favourite film is *The Dead Travel Fast*. The choice of a Hollywood action/ horror movie might be considered strange, for someone so ill-disposed towards both firearms and modern marketing, but in terms of *content* nobody's likely to be surprised. It's the very model of an evil-tyrant-builds-death-machine piece, even if the machine in question is an office-block full of corrupt (nay, daemonically-possessed) businessmen rather than a more conventional weapon. As it was made in the mid-1980s, Valentine likes to consider it a form of satire. What's most notable is that when the upper floors of the block are blown to vapour in the closing minutes of the story, they're destroyed only as a result of the self-sacrifice of one of the central cast, who's last seen priming a quantity of high explosive WITHOUT ANY TIMER MECHANISM TO SAVE HIM.

There's no question this is an act of heroism. All cultures teach their children to die for what's right, although obviously if an enemy nation tries it then it's just zealotry.

3.39 The Arena...

…so very, very different from this angle. It's like the story of the Prince and the Pauper, isn't it? For one night only, Tiffany's seeing things from the audience's point of view, right down to the fact that she's getting ground-filth on the bottom of her moderately expensive but carefully-selected shoes.

From here, she realises that the arena's more than just a walled-off patch of ground: it's a dent in the world, a little dimple in civilisation, or—more prosaically—a crater in the grass. Within the walls there are dry, dirt-covered slopes leading down to the arena floor. The great, flat crater-bottom is only six feet below the level of the fields around it, but even so it makes the barrier seem so much higher.

Ahead is the wide open expanse of the arena, with not a single human being to be seen, guarded on all sides by the empty hulks of the food stands. Beyond the stands, the walls, stretching so far around the amphitheatre that Tiffany experiences a kind of horizontal vertigo (is there a name for that?) as she tries to work out just how much land the arena covers. Above the walls, the big, blank, empty-TV expanse of the sky.

Directly ahead of her, the stage. Source of all the light.

She's already walking towards the stage. She feels no fear, as yet, mainly because the stage is so far away across the arena that it's not

yet *real* in any way. Like the kingdom of Heaven, it's a place that you might just reach one day but don't worry about until you're much, much closer. From here she can see the equipment's been moved from the stage, the drumkits and keyboards and amps (some of them actually used during the performance, some of them purely token gestures) having taken shelter for the night. But the videoscreen's still there.

3.40 The Videoscreen

The videoscreen is the backdrop to Tiffany's entire performance. It's a necessary part of any public appearance. Virtually no-one can see her in close detail from the audience—virtually no-one can pick up on the carefully-placed signs with which she's usually adorned, the diamond-stud in her forehead, the sexually-loaded snarl at the start of "Rising Star," the pin-pricks of sweat on her face that reassure everyone she's a real human being *for now*. 85% people find themselves watching the videoscreen for 85% of the time, only shifting back to Tiffany's body when she performs a particularly physical dance move. Anybody who asks why they don't just watch this on television from the comfort of home is an idiot, one who doesn't understand what's really happening.

The videoscreen is currently active, which is strange, given there's no audience here. It makes the arena feel haunted, in a curiously modern way, as though the performance is taking place without the spectators' bodies to give it substance. Her face looms over the world, smiling broadly, and Tiffany knows that without question she's looking at herself performing "In the Loop." Often the camera will catch the videoscreen behind Tiffany's head, causing an infinite recursion as the screen displays constantly-updated images of itself. This neat little paradox in video stretches the light out of shape, filling the sky immediately above the stage with a green ghost-glow, flickering with every change of camera angle. The lack of sound just makes things worse. It feels as though Tiffany's jumbo-sized iteration is trapped behind glass, unable to make herself heard.

Just like the eye of the insect. The videoscreen is made up of forty-eight smaller screens, the gaps between them barely visible from here. Does that make forty-eight iterations, forty-eight potential doppelgangers, or just one? Is there even a difference?

Tiffany keeps walking. By now she can see the shapes which stand on the stage in front of the screen, the hard silhouettes against the light of her performance. The idol-Tiffany on the screen continues to grin and dance, oblivious to the sombre, menacing nature of the

figures which (rather rudely) blot out portions of her neck and chin. There are at least half a dozen of them, although they fade into the darkness on either side of the stage. They're clearly waiting for her. Tiffany knows, before she can even make out their features, that all of them will be masked.

There's growling in the green-tinted sky, and it sounds like static. Tiffany feels the first few light spots of rain on her skin, as the ground between herself and the Executive prepares to turn itself into mud.

3.41 Déjà Vu

The girl who apparently looks like Tiffany Korta has vanished now, between the huge hoardings and into the arena. Inangela wonders how the girl's initiation is likely to go. Flashing lights are always good for divine visions. On the other hand, lights suggest there are people in the arena already, and depending on the girl's mood they're likely to either become angels of mercy or racoon-faced monsters. Ho hum.

Still keeping her backside parked against the side of the van, Inangela turns her head, one way and then the other. Checking to see if there are any signs of life outside the arena, any clues as to who might be hanging around inside the barrier with lights but no speakers. There's nobody around.

But.

But.

Wait.

A line of houses, or what look like houses. Low, flat, black, gap-toothed outlines, directly opposite the barriers. The edge of the suburbs. Almost invisible in the near-dark, and shying away from the light that's bleeding out of the arena. Hah! Hide if you like, feeble dwellings, you can't fool Inangela. To the left there's one short black block of architecture, just visible to the naked eye at the side of the open ground. A Hitler-moustache of buildings, so to speak.

She remembers, vaguely, Horror's reaction when Tiffany spat on the map. *You set this up, didn't you?*

She opens the door of the van. She leans inside.

'Hor,' she says.

'Mmm?' says Horror, who's finally started on the prawn crackers now that Inangela's out of claiming-distance.

'This is that big patch of ground behind the cineplex, isn't it?'

'Yeah,' says Horror. 'Thought you knew.'

Given that she was… a little *bewildered* the last time she was here, Inangela has to ask the next question.

'Where is it?'

'Wh't?' says Horror, ingeniously replacing the letter "a" with a small piece of cracker.

'You know. Where is it?'

Horror swallows. 'The big hole?'

'The crater. Yes.'

As expected, Horror turns toward the passenger door and nods. Towards the glowing black mass of the barrier.

'Think they filled it in a bit,' Horror adds.

Inangela stares in silence for a while, at this newly-discovered navel of the world which has just claimed its second initiate (at least). She knows that her next word's going to be important, and wants to deliver it with precision.

'Coincidence?' she says.

'Y'h,' says Horror. Creatively replacing both vowels with tiny, delicate particles of exotic sauce.

3.42 More Chance

Maybe not just a coincidence. This ground's been used as a festival site for years, but a three-night run of performances by a single solitary pop star (in however many iterations) is no festival. Only one field is required, out of all the fields that might play host to the masses. An attack crater, as neat and as flat-bottomed as those the weapons of War tend to leave? Where everything's been levelled out into dust, where the instant-noodle concessions can set up shop without any of the usual unhygienic, unsavoury mud to remind the paying customers of dirt, disease and (let's be blunt) excrement?

And let's look at it from the Executive's point of view. A great, wide, circular *impact crater*, once again giving Tiffany the smack of danger without any need for controversy. The attack, if that's what it was, was nearly three weeks ago. Time enough to remove any suggestion of bad taste, especially since nobody died here. As far as anyone can remember.

Not just a coincidence, then. There are causal connections here, between Inangela's rite and Tiffany's. One thing leads to another, although admittedly event A might only lead to event B via media you wouldn't normally notice. Through time, culture and the snackfood

industry.

3.43 The Judge of All the Earth

There are nine of them, in all. Even now, though, Tiffany has difficulty thinking of them as nine rather than seven plus two. Seven nameless, faceless Executives, plus Father Danzael and Mother Nod. Two hours ago, she faced them the way a pop star will *always* face her Executive—attentively, dimly understanding she's not the one in charge, but defiantly knowing the show can't go on without her. But now Tiffany's where the audience should be, in front of the stage, gazing up at the silhouettes of the seven-plus-two as they gaze down on her. It doesn't help that the show *does* seem to be going on without her. The Chief Executive, standing dead at centre stage and therefore right in front of her, is a hard shadow against the videoscreen's green spectre-light. Framed against Tiffany's own face, smiling and pouting and not singing a single thing that can be heard.

The nine figures are arranged in something approximating a semicircle, the Chief Executive towards the rear of the stage, the Executive members at the far left and far right—Danzael and Nod, respectively—standing close to the front. From down here on the crater floor, they're a perfect mirror of the wall around the arena. They, too, look bigger from down here. Tiffany turns her eyes up to the rain, and the Executive looks on in silence. No sound to interrupt the scene but the white noise of the weather.

Tiffany notes they're wearing their "best" clothes. Suits so finely-cut you'd think someone had sliced suit-shaped holes in the air, so that they fit snugly and precisely into the world without having to worry about little things like raindrops. Elaborate, exquisite evening-dresses on the women, with broad, sharp-edged shoulders that seem to give them beautiful, delicate, but ultimately gargoyle-like wings. Their masks aren't the same simple, big-eyed bone-faces she's used to. Their features are still hauntingly straightforward, with their empty eye-holes and their hollow snouts, but the shapes of the masks here are far more animalistic. No two alike, of course. The snouts are extended, like the skulls of things that burrow through the ground and root their faces in the filth. There are horns and crests, some which seem to Tiffany like the heavy, missile-sharp skulls of prehistoric animals.

Nod, to the right, is in translucent white—a delicate white boa drapes itself lovingly around her neck and shoulders. Her bone-face appears fragile, even bird-like, though there's no sign of a beak. Danzael, on the other end of the Executive's arc, sports his usual black and fades into the wings of the stage as a result. It somehow doesn't

surprise Tiffany that the horns at the back of his skull are as curved as a ram's.

The Chief Executive makes the grandest impression, though. Standing there at the rear of the stage, so that Tiffany's sure she'd feel distanced from him even if she could climb up to his level, his outline *spreads* across the videoscreen behind him. Great, sharp, jagged antlers sprouting from his heavy, over-extended skull, so big that from down on the ground you could swear they're holding up the sky. A ring of smaller, sharper spines at the crest of the mask, like a crown of thorns. The videoscreen behind him casts a halo of green light around his outline, carefully tracing out every quirk of the antlers. The spines cut across the enormous image of Tiffany, turning her bleach-white smile into something rough and ugly, full of black holes and broken teeth.

Tiffany knows, as sure as she's sure of anything, that her core-body doesn't look much better. Make-up and tan smeared across her skin, the diamond from her forehead lost somewhere on the night's adventures (probably in the road), rainwater spitting at her fashion sense. Nonetheless. She looks up at the Chief Executive and believes that she displays no fear.

The Chief Executive clears his throat. The noise bounces off the walls of the arena, and off the other members of the Executive, surrounding Tiffany on all sides.

'Tiffany,' he says, gently. 'I believe we have a problem. Don't we?'

3.44 Flirting

Some of the pieces that were supposed to make up the bomb mechanism are still under Valentine's bed. These include the detonator caps intended to spark the explosive, and the timer mechanism designed to give anyone in the vicinity a carefully-timed shot at survival.

Valentine has no idea how the bomb's going to be triggered without these two items, but he can't let that stop him now. The two halves of the critical mass are already in place, or at least in *some* kind of place. Each one fits inside a metal bracket near the centre of the box, although there's no way the two can touch unless a Hell of a lot of force is applied.

Or unless the brackets simply break. When Valentine opened the canisters, he soon found that the two halves of Red Uranium he's been given weren't the right shape to fit the brackets—unsurprising, as there can hardly be an industry standard for these things. He therefore had to bend the brackets into position with tools from one of the

medical kits, and it's possible they no longer have much integrity.

The first half went into its bracket without a problem. The second one slipped out of his hand while he was trying to fit it. It was only then that he realised how damp his hands were (the Red Uranium leaves a kind of grey, sparkling residue which mixes badly with sweat), and how much his arms were shaking. Adrenaline rather than nerves. When the second half of uranium slipped, it slid towards the bottom of the box, and there was one single moment of utter, indescribable serenity as it ever-so-briefly brushed against the surface of the first half.

There was no sound, no flash of light, no "miniature" nuclear reaction. The two weren't close enough to have a critical relationship. Alchemical flirting, not a marriage. Valentine found himself picking up the fallen half and trying again, without even pausing.

The last challenge is to fix the explosive in position. Difficult, as the bands crafted to hold it in place aren't here. Valentine reasons that it doesn't matter, as long as there's explosive on each side of the nuclear material.

He's been assured Red Uranium's key feature is its willingness to "marry" itself. That in mind, he begins working the putty-like explosive into the spaces in the box, working it around the edges of the metal. Strangely, this scares him in a way that fixing the uranium didn't. Possibly, it's because he knows what makes the uranium unhappy, but doesn't know how much he can squeeze and squelch the explosive before it complains. And an objection from the explosive would tear off his hands and let him feel his nerves being stripped away before he died. Alternatively, he gets the feeling—though it may be misguided—that a nuclear explosion is simply a state of not-being-there.

Overall, however, putting the bomb together is no harder than anyone might have expected. Valentine finds the key is just not stopping to think.

3.45 Afterlife

At this point, Valentine is absolutely sure he's going to die. Being a modern boy, this doesn't bother him as much as it might have bothered his ancestors. In no way is he *casual* about it, and to tell the truth there's always going to be that last biological streak of sheer terror, running all the way from the head to the heart and from the heart to the bowels. Look at it this way, though… what did his ancestors have, when they knew their bodies were running out of

time? The hope of an afterlife that never really gelled with anything in their own experience, a mystery prize at best, by no means a certainty even for the religious zealots in the family. Oh, and the chance to imagine their own funerals. Nothing more.

To think… the generations before him could only hope for a funeral, and maybe the occasional half-hearted visit from a descendant bearing flowers. Valentine will leave no body, no physical trace, and if it all goes well, nobody will even hear his name. (He's comfortable with this. He's never really liked his name.) Undoubtedly, though, most of what he is—most of what his life will achieve, his true and absolute meaning in this world—will only exist after his death.

So very like Tiffany Korta. Except that his "greater self" won't have his own face, to smile and pose for the camera. The way he imagines it, it'll be bright enough and hot enough to cauterise the wounds made by the War.

Incidentally, he can't stand Tiffany Korta's music. For some reason he finds it contrived.

3.46 Fed to Animals

Tiffany Korta has only been on trial once before, when she appeared on a TV magazine show which put her in the Hot Seat (actually a specific seat, designed to look a lot like an electric chair) and allowed teenaged members of the audience to ask her questions at will.

She'd been primed as to the nature of the questions beforehand—that goes without saying—but there was still a sense of acute guilt involved. Perhaps because it became clear, as the teenagers seethed in their chairs and tried to make their queries sound as penetrating as possible, that given the chance they'd *really* tear her apart. You could hear it in every request they made. You could hear they wanted to forget all about the question they'd told the producers they were going to ask, and instead ask whether she could actually do the two low notes on "Rising Star" without computer assistance, or how much she got paid for advertising jeans-cum-affiliated-perfume in a series of adverts which took one afternoon to film, or what it felt like to have been fucked by both a movie star *and* a director. The only thing stopping them was the understanding that they'd never get on TV this way.

Another reminder: Tiffany came from a Catholic home.

This is a trial. Most pop stars reach the point where they're "re-evaluated," where their Executives have to decide whether the stars

are still significant enough to make a difference, or whether their media-bodies are too small and shrivelled to be viable. Mostly, however, these decisions are made in offices or restaurants, when the stars aren't around. But Tiffany's standing before an Executive which gets its kicks wearing animal-bone masks, which has taken her to the point where she may start spawning doppelgangers at any moment, which has no qualms about hinting—just hinting—that it may have some mystical power over history itself. She suspects these people can erase her, or at least her current core-body, if they so wish.

The Chief Executive has already laid the charges before her, in reasonable, professional tones. And…

3.47 …The Charges Are as Follows

1. Unprofessionalism: chemical. The cocaine, of course, though the Chief Executive doesn't use that word explicitly. It'd be unseemly, when cocaine is such an industry standard. But he implies, in his gentle talk of 'particular excesses,' that Tiffany has crossed a certain line. This is a real law of her profession, Tiffany knows that, although as laws go it's rather medieval. Only the Executives are permitted to know where the line is. No performer knows how much is too much until she receives her first warning.

(The faces of the figures on either side of the Chief Executive are sharpened and reptilian, making up for their lack of jawbones with skulls that are, in themselves, jagged enough to cut through the skin. Basking in the green glow of their Chief, they look like clerks of court, listening intently as he tries to make the list of charges sound like a pleasant conversation. Ready to pick over the gristle of the case.)

2. Unprofessionalism: neurotic. All stars have needs. All great stars have needs which are occasionally bizarre. There are limits, however—once again, only an Executive knows where—and Tiffany has exceeded the boundaries of what's reasonable, demanding her Executive deals with a variety of paranoid concerns involving identical duplicates and her alleged imminent failure to exist. She's also displayed an obsession with her own appearance which goes beyond the bounds of showbusiness vanity, even insisting her hotel room be equipped with multiple VCR machines so she can watch herself from numerous angles, despite the valiant efforts of people like Father Danzael to cure her of this dangerous obsession.

(Father Danzael is impassive. He doesn't move, he doesn't slouch, he doesn't even scoff. Meanwhile Mother Nod, at the other end of the stage, is the only one of the assembly to show any motion at all. Every now and then she shakes her head, sadly, at the Chief Executive's words. Like a

mother hen fretting about a wayward chick.)

3. Unprofessionalism: sexual. The proclivities of stars, when it comes to copulating with their own kind, are well-known and of interest to nobody except the press and the public. Coupling with the lower classes, though, is as unforgivable now as it was in the twelfth century. Stories of Tiffany's sordid trysts with the servant-breed, with hotel staff and even taxi drivers, are legion. The Executive is obviously doing its best to keep these stories under control, but they could leak out to the press so, so easily, and where would she be then? Doesn't she realise that young girls are looking to her for moral guidance, all over the world? Does she want the coming generation to be full of prostitutes bearing her name on their foreheads? Does she? Does she? *Does* she?

(Not that the Chief Executive harangues her. Such a low, cinnamon-flavoured voice could never harangue. He makes it all sound so, so reasonable, that undertone of: 'Of course you're a slut, and you do understand why we're concerned, don't you?')

4. Unprofessionalism: contractual.

And that's it, isn't it? That's what it's all about. Tiffany is contractually bound to the Executive, bound by clauses far beyond any written agreement. Clauses that cut right to the bone. It's a *contract d'etre*. It's not just that her Executive maintains her, or services her, or even loves her. It's that it *is* her. Or at least that's the way the Executive sees things, but then, none of them have ever glimpsed the Truth.

The Chief Executive makes the situation quite clear, without saying a single word in that direction. Her problems, her neuroses, her strange, strange beliefs. The Executive could have been trusted to help her with any of them. And yet she ran, away from the hotel and away from the Executive, off in a cab to do God-knows-what with God-knows-whom and perform God-knows-how-many sexual perversions in the process. And can't she see how hurt the Executive is as a result?

'Hmmm?' concludes the Chief Executive.

3.48 Another Cut to the Chase:

The ambulance pulls out of the side-street and into the main thoroughfare, where the geisha-face of Tiffany Korta shines out of the window of an otherwise-abandoned megastore. It's safe to think of the ambulance as a kind of warhead, now. If it were to crash, and the fuel tank exploded, the device huddled behind the passenger seat would unquestionably burst open and show the world what it can do.

Valentine is aware of this, but it's not a thought that troubles him much. He's seen a lot of car accidents in the last two years, and none of them involved exploding fuel-tanks. Still… it's a Hell of a responsibility. You've got to wonder how those insect-plated Ship pilots must feel, knowing that one crash could make a great big hole in history itself.

This thought is side-tracked, though, as the ambulance turns onto the street and he sees the silver van on the pavement, right under the window of his flat. It looks as out-of-place and as awkward as always, and the two passer-by cars which happen to be moving through this part of the world at nearly four o'clock in the morning have to swerve around the part of it that juts out onto the road.

He's going to have to drive past the van. A van which, for all he knows, has nothing to do with the War-time powers at all and which just happens to *be* there. A van which doesn't necessarily contain any microwave-emitting weaponry at all, and which has in no way been proved to control the Dogs of War.

He pulls out into the middle of the road and begins to manoeuvre around it, wondering all the time if there's any way to make an ambulance look nonchalent.

3.49 Swerve

And without any warning at all, the van lurches from the pavement, straight towards him. Valentine, who didn't even realise its engine was running, feels the adrenaline coping with one more shock to the system. His first impulse is to guess the van's trying to force him off the road, and not the more prosaic *for Christ's sake what kind of idiot rams a vehicle if they know there's nuclear material inside?*

He responds to the challenge well, with a kind of aggressive driving that owes a lot to the needs of the ambulance service, not to mention some length of time spent in Coz's company. He threatens back. The wheel spins under his slippery, slippery fingers, and the ambulance veers towards the van, winging it and causing it to screech out a protest.

The driver isn't used to this. Valentine remains as calm as he thinks possible as he presses down the accelerator. The ambulance roars ahead, neatly missing the only car coming the other way along the street, and the van seems briefly confused before it realises it has to accelerate as well.

In the next few moments, as the gap between the vehicles widens and Valentine very nearly forgets that he's driving somewhere to die,

he only takes his hands off the wheel twice. Once to turn on the siren. Twice to wipe the uranium off his hands.

3.50 Tragedies

Think of the consequences of a crashed Ship! Valentine certainly does. This is either the stuff of bloody and highly censored news reports or the stuff of Hollywood drama.

The news version:

A ship crashes during regular War manoeuvres, say, over an urban population like the town. Now, the locals might accept the thought of sizeable parts of the town being rocketed into the ground on a pseudo-regular basis, but these are *deliberate* War casualties and nowhere near as shocking as a huge and terrible accident. A Ship moving through time literally brings a whole new dimension to the concept of "fatalities." When a car crashes in 2D, it can only kill and maim bystanders in front of it or to either side. When a plane crashes in 3D, it spreads the atrocity across the ground over a stretch of miles. The people look up and hot fuel pours into their eyes, the rain of metal breaks bones and tears through the bonnets of parked cars. And beyond that, there's 4D.

Imagine, as Valentine does on his really, really bad days, a Ship bursting open while travelling through history. Imagine every point in time which that vessel touches, rupturing and burning. Causing a chain reaction as causality buckles, one part of damaged history changing everything that takes place afterwards (and maybe even beforehand, Valentine isn't sure how the Ships might work) until the shockwave hits *another* part of the exploding ship a hundred years away. Imagine the Ship opening its bowels and disgorging nuclear or worse-than-nuclear fuel at Year Zero. Imagine the parochial, civilian casualties as they burn, and their futures burn, and their families burn even if those families are a billion miles away. Imagine carnage that reaches across generations, with no visible pattern to connect one horror to the next. Valentine suspects it'd look very much like the War itself.

On the other hand, there's the Hollywood version. A Ship crashes at some point in history, burying itself in the ground to avoid detection by the hick-like locals. A team of heroic soldiers are dispatched to rescue the crew of the Ship, and undergo a profound male-bonding experience as they put themselves on the line to save their own kind, all the time aware that the cruel, foreign, primitive townspeople will burn them as witches if their identities are revealed.

One treatment, coming up later.

3.51 Static

The rain gets heavier, but the sky only gets lighter, fading from grey-green to green-grey above the arena. The static in the sky keeps hissing, keeps grumbling, keeps waiting for someone to finish the tuning and make it either night or dawn.

The Chief Executive, staring down at Tiffany. The Executive in general, waiting for her to speak. Tiffany herself, knowing what these people want her to say.

They don't require an apology, as such. Pop stars should avoid apologising wherever possible. They just want a promise. They want her to be good in future, "good" within the accepted limits of "good" for someone in her position. They must know she sees this as an initiation, because she can't see it any other way, now she's walked into the outside world and come back of her own accord. They wish to remind her how silly all of this is, and tell her she can go back to the old, comfortable way of doing things if she just admits that only the Executive understands the nuances of her uber-self (something which is, contractually, partly the Executive's property). Call this one bad night. Circulate a few stories to the press, just in case anybody noticed her.

But Tiffany remembers what she saw in the tower block, and remembers what the goth-girl told her, and knows there are some things you can't go back from. Not without military-level brainwashing.

So. The Chief Executive, staring down at Tiffany. The Executive in general, waiting for her to speak. Tiffany herself, knowing what these people want her to say.

3.52 Apocalypse Boy

*Shiva Shiva Shiva

3.53 Go Home Again

The iteration on the videoscreen comes out from behind the Chief Executive's great crown of antlers, still smiling for the benefit of the audience that isn't there. Tiffany, core-Tiffany, finds herself smiling as she opens her mouth. A practised, interview-friendly smile. She can't help it. Her image is making her do it. Sympathetic magic on a huge scale.

The static hiss of the sky settles down a little. The world is holding its breath. She's sure the Executive members are, too, behind their animal faces.

And she says:

'Are you really Faction Paradox?'

This isn't what they've been expecting. Doesn't she understand that she's on trial here? They don't mutter among themselves, because this is the kind of jury which has to remain silent at all costs, but you can tell they're having trouble not glancing at each other. Do they know that she really, really didn't mean to smile like that?

'Tiffany,' sighs the Chief Executive, with his usual tone of affectionate menace. 'You do understand the implications of what I've told you, don't you?'

'Oh… yeah,' Tiffany tells him. 'Sure, yeah. But… *are* you?'

The Chief Executive glances at one of his hovering, reptile-faced clerks. The clerk tilts his head, just a little. It must say volumes if you know how to read skull.

'Have we ever claimed to be Faction Paradox?' the Chief Executive asks, turning his attention back to the accused.

'Nnnnnnnnnno,' says Tiffany, cautiously. 'But… y'know.'

'Well then. What matters is that we're your Executive. What matters is that we care about you. We love you, in our own way. You know that, don't you, Tiffany?'

'But *are* you Faction Paradox, though?'

'Tiffany—'

'But *are* you?' She's into the swing of this now. The massive, juddering image of her own face is actually helping rather than distracting her. It makes her remember what Miss Ruth showed her, and the screen even has that compound-eye feel. 'You've got the masks, yeah? And the masks are, like… bone.'

'Yes, Tiffany, they're bone.'

‘Does that make you real, though?’

The Executive’s becoming unsettled now. Tiffany doesn’t immediately spot that the rumbling she can hear is the rumbling of low voices, muffled by unusually heavy masks, and not thunder or traffic-noise at all.

‘We’ve never made any claims that we couldn’t validate,’ the Chief Executive replies. ‘You know that. Tiffany.’ (Her name’s an afterthought. A way, perhaps, of tying her down to this one body and this one part of her identity. Cutting her off from any support she might get from the grand iteration behind him.)

Tiffany’s insistent now. ‘So you’re *not* Faction Paradox? ‘Cos if you’re not, then maybe you don’t really understand—’

‘This is irrelevant,’ snaps the Chief Executive.

The rumbling ends, then, and for the first time Tiffany feels something which might be comparable to fear. Not because the Chief Executive is so obviously losing his temper… well, all right, that’s part of it. It’s always a shock when your father-figure loses his temper. No: for Tiffany, there’s a realisation that comes at this moment.

The realisation is that she’s in a very immediate kind of danger, because this is no longer theoretical. The Executive *can* destroy her. She’s always known this in theory, but it’s only here and now—surrounded, on her own, in a field, cut off from the rest of her iterations, coming down from the night’s events and without anyone to move her to another scene—she realises the number of ways they can do it.

They can destroy her uber-self, manipulate the media, weaken her body and leave her with too little of herself to function. They can attack her through the law, sue her for breach of contract, either in the purely human courts or in the “higher” courts which she doesn’t have a name for (she doesn’t know the word “Mephistophelean”) but which everybody instinctively knows *have* to exist if the world makes any sense at all.

Or they can just kill her and bury her in the mud.

She wonders which of the three is worst. Obeying the usual Catholic instincts, she takes an obedient step back from the stage as the Chief Executive loses his temper and bows her head towards the ground.

3.54 Small Girl

There was a time, once, when Tiffany questioned the need for the videoscreen. Not knowing any better in those days, she took the

“people should stay in and watch the television” view. It was Mother Nod, chittering and shaking her head, who put her right.

‘Who knows, one day you might be glad the screen’s there,’ she said. ‘We could show a recording of an old performance on the screen, and get someone your size to do the dance steps. Nobody would ever know from the audience. You could take the whole night off.’

It was evidently meant as a joke. Even then, Tiffany felt the terrible undertone of a threat there somewhere.

By this stage the threat’s fairly explicit, especially since the nine Executive members have chosen to arrange themselves in front of a screen showing such a generic-looking performance. From this point on, the Executive could cut Tiffany’s core-self off from all the other iterations and it wouldn’t make much of a difference. In War terminology, this process is known as “decapitation,” but the difference is that unlike politicians, pop stars can keep moving even after their heads have been cut off.

All it really needs now is for the Chief Executive to utter that one key and sublimely menacing phrase: ‘Why don’t you take some time out to think about it?’

3.55 Becoming More Like Coz

Anyone who’s ever been near a car knows how animal they can be. Every traffic system is an ecosystem. Most people never get a car-chase of their own, but you’d be amazed how natural it all seems. It hits the primal nerve, when you’re driving at this speed to avoid getting caught by a vehicle that’s bigger or blacker or just more carnivorous.

Valentine has two advantages. One is that he’s got an ambulance and the siren’s already howling—how’s that for a natural defence?—so the other vehicles have no option but to slam on the brakes to let him pass. Rival drivers swear at him, then feel guilty about swearing since there could be someone dying in the ambulance. (There is, of course. In fact there may be more than one person dying there.)

Clear stretch of road. Check the mirror. Yes: behind him, in the herd of headlights he’s just left behind, there are two which seem determined to step out of the pack. Weaving. Trying to get ahead. Still some distance away.

Oh yes, the second advantage. Well, the second advantage is Valentine’s state of mind.

He couldn’t help it. When he first took to the roads with the jury-

rigged bomb in the back, he did something other people might not have considered wise. He didn't even mean to it, really. It just seemed natural to him. Ripping away from the centre of town at unsafe speeds, just like his partner tends to do at this time of the morning, he somehow found his eyes being drawn towards the passenger seat. Towards the flask.

Wise animals always eat food when they see it, just to store it up in their bodies in case there's a future shortage. Everything has a tendency to eat when it's not hungry, at least within the limits of its environment. This environment? It's an environment that demands speed. It's why all-nite stopovers sell caffeine pills as well as chocolate, music CDs as well as polite little cartons of chow mein.

Valentine is well aware that the pills make Coz hallucinate as well as making him drive faster. Until now, though, he's always thought of hallucination as seeing things that aren't there, angels and daemons and whatever you like. In fact, right now he's starting to think that he's just seeing what he knows is *already* there. For example, as he passes more and more of the traffic lights it's notable that more and more of them appear to be green. Which makes sense, because to an ambulance driver they *are* all green, all of the time. The actual, literal colour of them is unimportant. Valentine knows what they say, and what they say is that he can go through them.

3.56 Knowing Who You Are

'You're not happy,' says the Chief Executive.

Tiffany doesn't reply. Doesn't shake her head. She keeps her eyes fixed to the ground, and resists the absurd schoolroom urge to make sure her uniform's in order. To make sure there are no tell-tale traces of white powder on her top lip, or to apologise for the missing regulation forehead-stud.

'We understand,' says the Chief Executive, reasonably. With her eyes fixed on the dirt of the floor, Tiffany can't think of him as anything but a part of this arena, his voice coming to her straight out of the static of the sky. 'You're only human. We hope.'

Polite, reassuring laughter from the rest of the Executive. With her, not at her. Or at least that's what it sounds like, so somewhere, somehow, part of her uber-self must be laughing. Because this body certainly isn't.

'You have a very busy lifestyle,' the Chief Executive continues. Lifestyle: a word that can be used to make any point at all, under any circumstances. 'You're under a lot of stress, we know that. You must

be confused. Upset.'

Tiffany finds herself nodding.

'Why don't you take some time out to think about it?' suggests the Chief Executive.

Which is when she *knows*.

She looks up, then. Looks up at the enormous head of antlers that presides over this inquisition, past the skull and past the crown of thorns. She sees her own face beyond him, eyes wide, teeth bared, going through the motions of the first encore. Her massive head snaps from one side to the other, in time to music that nobody can hear, the waves of her hair filling the forty-eight screens that make up this one image.

She knows, with an absolute certainty which erases any thought of this being a tired, neurotic, post-coke delusion, that the figure on the screen is *not her*.

3.57 Knowing Who You Aren't

Tiffany Korta went to Miss Ruth in search of her true self. She found her true self, and gosh, wasn't it big.

Long before she signed up with the Executive, long before it started to help her save up parts of her identity in little untraceable caches all over the world, she was sensitive (some would say preternaturally so) to the ways of the media. We know she would have ended up being able to para-read videotape eventually, with or without Miss Ruth's help. So when she came face-to-face with her greater self on floor eleven of the tower block, it was like looking in a mirror, with all the pain and self-loathing that implies.

Like seeing her full reflection for the first time after years of catching glimpses of it in a puddle. And if someone suddenly showed you a photo of your own face, but changed one of your most important features—if they twisted your nose out of shape, say, or pulled your mouth wide—then you'd know, would you?

Standing there before the Executive's judgement, looking up at the videoscreen, Tiffany becomes briefly-but-instantly aware of herself—of every part of her big, big being. And the videoscreen image is as alien to her as a third eye or a bone through the nose. It is not, in any way, a recording of the body she currently thinks of as her core-self.

Which is why she knows that although there almost certainly will be a Tiffany Korta performing on this stage tomorrow night (or tonight, if you want to be pedantic), that Tiffany Korta will not be the

one whose cells are currently assembled here in this field. She's being given the night off, and in this moment of clarity it becomes fairly clear that her services aren't going to be needed for much longer.

3.58 The Symbol in the Land of the Dead

The boundary of the north-eastern edge of town is marked by an overpass, two huge, heavy slabs of concrete crossed over each other at right-angles, one skirting the town itself and the other leading straight out into the territories beyond. That way lies the city—which is to say, the closest settlement to this which can safely be called a city. Hence, this edge of town requires a border to prevent the city stealing its mass.

There are no human guards at the boundary, although once the House of Marrero has been discretely parked under the shadow of the overpass Inangela soon finds signs of native life. There's graffiti here, with tribal words that aren't remotely English. The remains of a fire, a thin trace of ash under the arch, protected from the spit of the rain. Inangela's reminded, not for the first time tonight, of her own adolescence. But most intriguing of all, there's the outline of a dissected human body, scratched in white chalk on the grey slabs.

Inangela approves of this kind of thing. She, too, is busy tracing the outline of a body on the streets of the town: She's even named the five points of the pentagram north, north-east, south-east, south-west and north-west, so hold the map the right way up and you can join the dots to make a stick-man (under the surface, however, she knows it isn't remotely human in shape).

She wonders, at this particular moment, whether the corpse-line under the overpass is based on a particular dead person. There must be a roaring underground trade, surely, in the corpse-lines of famous murder and suicide victims? Think of all those celebrities, shot or poisoned or drowned in their own internal fluids! Once the investigations came to a close, did someone really rub out their silhouettes rather than tearing up the floorboards and selling them for half a fortune?

It takes Inangela and Horror a while to track down the speed camera closest to the very, very edge of town, before Inangela gets the spray-can out of her pocket and prepares the next stage of the summoning. Oddly, the chalk outline has cheered her to no end. Someone wants this place to look like death. And why not? Death's always personified as a person. Usually as a person with a skull for a

face and a penchant for black, but even Inangela wouldn't be seen dead - *bad choice of phrase* - wouldn't be seen at *all* doing a Waco Black and pretending to be the bastard child of the grim reaper. Why shouldn't death be personified as a place, for once? Especially the crack-soaked arse-end of a town like this one.

3.59 The Sentence

The Chief Executive is explaining the measures he's going to take to help Tiffany find herself (either a very appropriate choice of phrase or a truly appalling one). He's explaining she needs time to relax, that she doesn't have to worry about the last night of the performance in this town, that they can work something out. His speech is calm, measured and every other sentence ends with the word "Tiffany."

Tiffany can no longer listen. She's been spending the past couple of minutes watching the encore on the videoscreen, and the more she watches the other iteration of herself, the less it seems to be like any version of herself she knows.

'*Why don't you take some time out to think about it?*' Does the Chief Executive want her to agree? Of course he does. So that he can put a different iteration of her on the stage eighteen hours from now. Someone who looks like her, miming to the videoscreen recording. Or does the *thing* here on display in the arena prove that the Executive has control of a true doppelganger?

She knows what she has to do. To some extent, she's known ever since she came face-to-face with herself.

So.

'Yes,' she tells the Chief Executive.

There's a definite sense of relief from the Executive. Nobody says anything, as such, but you can see each and every one of them lean back a little. Relaxing. The relief is very nearly visible on the faces of the birds and reptiles and fish and dinosaurs and creatures of the forest. Very nearly.

'I'm glad to hear that, Tiffany,' announces the Chief Executive. 'I'm sure we can find you a nice, quiet place to go… shall we say… on retreat.'

'No, that's okay,' says Tiffany.

A brief, lowing chuckle from some of the Executive's members. 'You really will need professional guidance,' the Chief explains. 'We know places. Places you'll like.'

'S'okay,' says Tiffany, trying to sound nonchalant. 'I'll stay here.'

Now even the Tiffany on the screen looks nervous. But maybe it's just because she's going for one of the really, really high notes.

'Here?' queries the Chief Executive.

Tiffany nods, three times fast. The Chief Executive probably doesn't find it cute. 'I want to stay in this town,' she says. 'You know? 'Cause… if I'm pulling out of a gig, then it's good if I give them *something*.'

'You're not necessarily—'

'It'll look kind of nice,' Tiffany goes on, knowing that if she lets him get a word in then she might falter again and end up staring at the ground. 'We can say I've lost my voice or something, but that I'll be staying at the hotel until I can do the gig properly, 'cause I don't want to disappoint anyone. Everyone'll like that.'

There's a low rumble behind the Chief Executive's mask. And are the others looking at him expectantly, now? 'Tiffany… the performance can still go ahead.'

'But you said I needed—'

'The performance can still go ahead.' This time the Catholic thing doesn't kick in, and Tiffany keeps staring at the Chief Executive instead of fixing her eyes on the dirt. He sees this, and softens up a little with a half-hearted: 'Listen to me. Please.'

Tiffany fixes her eyes dead on the videoscreen, looking right through his antlers, making it perfectly clear what she's looking at. Out of the corner of her eye, she notices that Father Denzael is the first one who catches on, turning his head to look at the big Tiffany on the screen.

'I don't get it,' lies Tiffany. 'How can there be a performance if I'm not doing it? You need me, right?'

Suddenly the Executive realises, as a single entity, that Tiffany knows exactly what's going on here. And perhaps she really *has* seen something its members don't fully understand.

Only now does it strike her this is likely to push them away from the "attacking her identity" option and towards the "burying her in a field" option. Only now does she realise what Miss Ruth really meant, about cutting her last link to the Pit.

4. First Light

4.00 Let's Get to the Point:

What does Inangela expect the various archons and higher powers of Faction Paradox, the *real* Faction Paradox, to actually look like?

Not a lot. Inangela, like Tiffany and like Valentine and like so many others, grew up in a world where if something wasn't watched by a sizeable audience then it didn't matter; where if you did something stupid, it was a wise precaution to give a knowing sideways glance to the Fourth Wall, *just in case*. Inangela stopped believing she was the star of her own TV show at age twelve, although the process left her with a deep-rooted attachment to the modern media's procedures without her having any real interest in the content.

In her world every event must be closely monitored, if not scripted in advance. Everything must begin with the opening theme and end with the credits. Scene-changes must be clearly marked out. Frequently, she's said things to Horror like, 'Whatever happens, I don't want to end up eating at Mr. Cod's Pantry,' just because she knows for a fact that they *will* end up at Mr. Cod's Pantry and wants to make it easier for someone to splice the two scenes together. Thus cutting out the dull car journey in-between.

What does Faction Paradox look like? It looks like the audience she's never really tried to picture, a faceless mass of expectation, the crowd for whom she's currently performing this ritual. The ersatz bone-face, which currently rests in her jacket pocket again, has no inherent mystical function and just marks her out as one of the *interesting* people. One of the Us. One of the few who's actually worth watching.

4.01 Or:

What does Valentine expect the various archons and higher powers of Faction Paradox, the *real* Faction Paradox, to actually look like?

Unlike most of the population, he doesn't expect them to wear masks. Masks *have* been known, among the secret ranks and orders of the past. One such mask, claimed by many to be the ancestor of the modern Faction mask, was known to the British Royal Society until at least 1799 (though God knows what youth-culture-minded individual might have resurrected the design). But then, members of eighteenth century secret societies also wore knee-length socks and powdered

wigs. That doesn't mean they'd be seen dead doing it today. Or not seen. Whichever is most appropriate.

If there's one thing Valentine's learned, from his years of associating with radicals and pretend-radicals, extremists and exhibitionists, it's that nobody who gets things done ever wears a badge. He can't be sure whether the Faction which now "advises" him really *is* the inheritor of a centuries-old political and philosophical wisdom, but he knows it hardly matters.

No real revolutionary would ever go masked. The first thing the Faction told him.

He's well aware there's a particularly crafty double-meaning in that piece of wisdom. He hasn't yet figured out there's also a hidden joke thrown into the mix.

4.02 Or Even:

What does Tiffany Korta expect the various archons and higher powers of Faction Paradox, the real Faction Paradox, to actually look like?

Like a room full of people in masks, sitting around a huge semicircular table and deciding the shape of her life, the shape of the world, the shape of the culture-in-general. In her imagination there's a vast map of the world behind them, covered in little blue blinking lights to mark out their agents and keep track of their nefarious schemes, rather than the hotel-room décor she's actually used to seeing in this context. (The result of an in-flight movie about an imminent nuclear war, which to be honest she didn't really understand… it was full of the names of countries that according to Father Danzael didn't exist any more.)

By now, Tiffany knows she's been led astray. But should she have a grave, rather than just a pit in a muddy field, she'll still go to it imagining the Faction War-Room.

4.03 This One Last Chance

'No,' says the Chief Executive.

See: now he isn't even pretending that Tiffany's the important one. Tiffany's just stated, in her own special way, that she believes the image on the screen to be the doppelganger (possibly even the same one she saw in the hotel room, who knows?). If he were keeping up the pretence then the Chief Executive would just have told her, in sad and sorrowful tones, this proves how "upset" she is. Instead he's

simply forbidding her to stay here, in the town, in her own personal place of initiation.

'No?' says Tiffany.

'It isn't possible,' the Chief Executive insists. 'Or desirable. I know you understand.'

'*Can* you, kind of… make me leave?'

'You're under contract,' flusters Mother Nod.

It's the first time that any of the other Executive members have spoken, and it actually makes some of them jump. She sounds panicked. She's probably worried civilisation will collapse if Executive contracts are broken.

'Uh-huh,' says Tiffany, who's never had to play the innocent before (except on video). 'I'm under contract to do the last performance, right? So I've got to stay here.'

'She didn't mean that contract,' says the Chief Executive.

Tiffany just blinks up at him.

'Can you make me leave?' she asks. A serious question.

'Tiffany,' says another voice.

Tiffany turns her head, in time to see Father Danzael step forward out of the shadows at the side of the stage, becoming the first of the assembly to break formation. The videoscreen light gives him the same kind of halo that surrounds the Chief's antlers. It suits his horns surprisingly well. All he needs is the ability to blow smoke out of his snout.

'You're making a mistake,' he says. He sounds sombre rather than drunk. It's a bad omen in itself. Or is the usual slur and skewed walk just part of his image?

'I'm okay,' Tiffany tells him, levelly. She tries giving him her smile, which normally makes him scoff, but a scoff would be good enough to bring him back to her.

Instead he remains silent and impassive, the rain pattering against the bone of his face and not even making him flinch.

'No,' he says. 'You're really not.'

4.04 Near Miss (3)

Fields. Patches of dark, mud-stained grey, starting to become visible on either side of the road, as the sky slowly thinks about getting lighter and the day starts to fade into dark blue. Only *thinks* about

getting lighter, mind you.

Valentine's given up on blinking, for the time being. Instead he's developed a new form of reflex action, which involves focusing his eyes—just for a split-second each time—on the darkness of the rear-view mirror. When he sees another pair of headlights behind him, he'll know it's time to break out of this trance-like, Buddha-faced, sixty-miles-per-hour state. Even the baby-howling of the ambulance siren is a calming thing now, almost like breathing. Weeee-EEEEE-uuuh. Weeee-EEEEE-uuuh.

He knows he must be very, very tired by now, but he keeps up his rear-view-mirror-blinking and tries not to let it worry him. There hasn't been any sign of the silver van for some time now. It's an urban animal, and he imagines it lurking in the suburbs a quarter of a mile behind him, waiting for him to come back inside its territory. Or maybe it just lost him. He took enough sudden, awkward, near-suicidal turnings.

So it's during one of his brief, makeshift blinks that the girl appears in the road in front of him. She's only there briefly, but then, she's only a few yards in front of a fast-moving ambulance so it's not as if she can really stay there for long. She glows in the headlights, as pale as the ghosting on a TV set, and Valentine does his best to swerve even though his hands are guaranteed to slide over the wheel.

He tries aiming the vehicle towards one of the dark patches on the road ahead, not towards the phantom-light with its washed-out face and washed-out skin, but the girl seems to move wherever the headlights move and for a few moments, it feels like the ambulance is trying to escape its own light. And when the vehicle hits her, there's no impact against the bonnet and no bump as she falls under the wheels, just the sight—in Valentine's eyes, that is—of the blood cells breaking up at the back of his eyes. Now that he's blinking again.

4.05 Hit

In all honesty, the girl's apparition really doesn't need to be described here. Inangela saw the very same kind of figure in the headlights, no more than an hour ago, in the concrete dwarf-world of Chemikaze Lane. It could almost be the same girl, if that weren't logically impossible.

On this occasion, Valentine feels sure he saw a knife in her hand just before he blinked her out of existence, but he knows she can't possibly have really been there, because he doesn't feel any body vanish under the ambulance and besides…

…ah, this is the complicated part. Patterns marked on maps, sites of the War linked together to make inexplicable designs. That old belief in ley-lines, that old belief in unseen routes of power worked into the earth, now literally true thanks to cable TV and the great pioneers of the electrical. Occasionally, roads (ordinary, visible, human roads) will exactly follow the course of these mythical lines, which is why there are now more haunted roads in the world than haunted houses —a house can only intersect the invisible world at *one* point.

Right now, Valentine's convinced he's moving, or swerving, or careering along one of these hidden routes. He knows there's something under the earth, not far from here. He imagines it stretching out its limbs along the roadways and pipelines. Even if the hallucination he's just suffered is no different to Coz seeing dead children at every turn, he knows that the girl on the road was real, as much as a celluloid image is real or as much as the future's real.

And yes, it also occurred to him that it might be the departing ghost of the girl in the back of the ambulance. Her and the future, what's the difference?

Nevertheless, nevertheless. There are more immediate things to consider. When the future-girl appeared in the middle of the road, Valentine tried to swerve towards the darkness, and he can't have noticed that the darkness in question was *moving*. The girl was wholly intangible. The large, black object which has suddenly slurred into the ambulance's path, at an entertainingly reckless speed, has a lot more mass behind it.

On a night like this, a collision was inevitable sooner or later.

4.06 Something Else

Tiffany isn't sure what she's watching, which is remarkable, given her usual instincts. The footage being shown on the videoscreen appears to be an interview, an interview with Tiffany herself, or a Tiffany. Unlike the concert footage it has a soundtrack.

The Tiffany on the screen—Tiffany's first instinct is to think of her as DoppelTiffany—is reclining on a leather chair that smacks of TV-studio-casual, wearing much the same clothes that HereTiffany's wearing, though admittedly without the rain-splotches. DoppelTiffany looks relaxed, happy, even smug. There's the hint of a smile on her face as she talks to the (female) interviewer, one hand behind her head, toying coquettishly with her dreadlocks. Dreadlocks. Has she ever actually had dreadlocks?

Indeed, can HereTiffany identify anything about the footage at all?

Watching the performance was like seeing a photo of herself with the nose missing, but this… more like looking at an altered feature that isn't immediately obvious, a mole on the neck or a lock of hair behind the ear. It might be her body up there. It might not.

'…a couple of performers *are* starting to come out as anti-War,' the interviewer is saying. 'Would you ever do anything like that? Is there a cause you'd want to get involved with?'

'Um, not really,' says DoppelTiffany. 'I kind of think that's… not what pop stars should do?' (She deftly turns it into a question, thus encouraging the interviewer to agree with her and make the audience think her point's been validated.) 'I think everyone should have the right to say what they like, but, y'know… there's kids who listen to pop music when they're really young? And you kind of don't want to push it on them like that.'

Stock answer. Expertly delivered. It makes her sound as if she's thought about these things, but removes any opinion which might lessen the fanbase. HereTiffany looks down from the screen for a moment, channel-hopping from herself to the Executive to Danzael. Both the Chief and the Father keep their faces turned towards the screen. Giving DoppelTiffany precedence over HereTiffany, just like any audience would.

'So you don't have any opinion about the War?' asks the interviewer, which makes her sound probing, although in fact she's just inviting more generic comments.

'I think it's a shame,' says DoppelTiffany.

Textbook.

'I think it should have started before now,' DoppelTiffany goes on.

Everything you'd expect from a… wait a minute.

What?

'There's too many people in the world anyway,' DoppelTiffany continues. 'It's, y'know, probably good that so many of them are getting killed by mistake.'

It's hard to know what's most surprising here. The words which seem to be coming out of DoppelTiffany's mouth, or the fact that HereTiffany still isn't *absolutely* sure whether this is really her or not.

4.07 The Fall Of

It was like this:

Inangela, believing the ritual had a *pulse* of its own, was worried

that the House of Marrero might not make it to the fourth point of the pentagram without the whole shebang falling out of synch. This meant encouraging Horror, however subtly, to go faster. By the time they found themselves heading back through the fields, not far from the point where they left the blonde girl at the navel of the world, the only thing stopping Horror from putting the pedal to the floor was a crushed polystyrene fillet-o-fish carton lying between the two.

Actually they seemed to be getting closer to the arena than absolutely necessary, given Inangela had planned to cross the town at a precise 72-degree angle from the point where they sprayed the last speed-camera. Something was apparently inclining Horror to drive along roads they'd already used, but Horror just shrugged when this was pointed out to her. No matter. The point was that at a velocity of "full speed minus the width of a crushed carton," they turned—nay, *screeched*—onto the road leading back towards the heart of town.

The accident was due to many things. The vehicle that bore down on Inangela and Horror was moving at no little speed itself. Insurance-wise, that's the good news. On the other hand the House of Marrero's headlights couldn't in all conscience have been described as the brightest available, especially not since they were rather muted by the layers of scotch tape which kept the glass covers in place. In fact the first that Inangela knew about the oncoming vehicle was the liquid-light flash as one set of headlights blotted out the other, causing blotches in her eyes and briefly causing her to form a small, delusional blind-spot in the shape of a human being. There was the sound of wailing, but it didn't last long.

Then came the crash.

4.08 And Now?

Now that Horror's sweat-stuck in the driver's seat, repeatedly pulling at levers and flipping switches in the hope of getting the engine to do anything? Now that the two vehicles have bounced off each other (if a word as soft as "bounce" can be used to describe the crunch and hiss of two large metal objects running smack into the laws of inertia) and come to a halt at awkward angles across the road, the other with its engine still grumbling but the House completely silent?

Now Inangela can see that the other vehicle is, in fact, an ambulance. The very worst kind of vehicle to run into. It gets all the sympathy. At least she's accustomed herself to the fact that the pulsing blue light—the one that's annoyingly making her eyes get bigger and smaller and bigger and smaller—is caused by the lamp on the

ambulance's top rather than by any damage on the inside of her skull.

There's a hot patch of headlight-glare between the vehicles, one that lights up the ambulance driver's face—really lights him *up*, Bohemian Rhapsody style. He's young and thin, with that underpaid-lifestyle look that medical crews are supposed to have, but he doesn't look as if he belongs there. Inangela briefly wonders if the vehicle's been stolen. He'd probably be quite attractive, if you could shave and dress him, plus find a way of slapping that dozy expression off his face.

Horror keeps tugging at the controls. Various mechanisms behind the dashboard make *tick-tick-ticking* noises, giving Inangela the impression that Horror doesn't know what most of the switches actually do and has never even tried using them before. For Horror, it's likely a case of trying to find the "undo accident" button. At least she's turned the windshield-wipers on, to stop the rain clogging up the glass.

'I'd better go and talk to him,' says Inangela.

Horror swears. Probably at matter itself rather than any object made of it.

'There could be someone dying in there,' Inangela adds, nodding at the ambulance.

'Go on then, fuck off,' mumbles Horror.

So Inangela does.

4.09 Getting Involved

The girl in the black coat is getting out of the van, her big leathery body sliding out of its seat and plopping onto the rain-sodden tarmac. She's overweight, but not un-pretty. Her lipstick and her big, arched eyebrows are much too carefully-placed for someone trying to look so reckless. Valentine can imagine her in the crowd at the Tiffany Korta performance, one of the older attendees, the kind who sees pop music as a triumph of irony over art. Her face is blue under the ambulance-light as she trudges towards him. Even with all the other thoughts in his head, Valentine finds his eyes aiming at her breasts.

His other thoughts are vital. He's thinking: *I don't believe that was an accident. I've never had an accident before. If I'm being followed, this is as good a way as any to stop me getting to the Ship. Does the chunky girl work for the same people who sent the Dogs? Do her eyes glow in the dark?*

He's thinking: *There's plastic explosive and nuclear material on the floor behind me. I heard it clunk against the passenger seat when I crashed. If it were going to explode, it would have done it by now, wouldn't it?*

He's thinking: *Am I terrified? God. I can't remember. I can't remember what it's like to be terrified. Is this why Coz takes the pills?*

Now the girl's standing by the door on the passenger side, the closest door to the beached, helpless-looking black van that's slewed across the middle of the road. She waits until he's wound the window all the way down before she speaks.

'I just want to say,' she tells him. 'That wasn't completely our fault.'

Oh God. It was *deliberate, then.*

'The Ship,' says Valentine. 'You're trying to protect the Ship.'

The girl blinks at him. Wipes the little raindrops out of her eyes.

'Um, sorry?' she says.

"*Sorry"? No, wait. Hold on, what if she's just…?*

Oh, no.

But the girl's already leaning forward, resting her chunkiness against the passenger door with her fingers on the lip of the window. 'Look… are you carrying someone in there?' she asks. 'D'you need to get somewhere in a hurry, or…?'

Valentine isn't sure whether the twitch is visible. He suddenly realises the girl's only leaning against the door so she can peer into the back of the ambulance, like someone who wants to stare at a road accident but got there too late. He feels the sudden urge to throw himself into the back of the vehicle and on top of the dead-or-dying patient, to stop anyone seeing her, but he never gets the chance to act on that. Because the girl, the chunky girl, has already seen something else.

She's looking down, at the floor of the driver's section. At the two empty metal containers which have now come to rest where Coz's size-13 feet usually go.

He tries to read her expression, but she doesn't appear to have one.

'Um,' the girl says. 'Um… hang on a second.'

4.10 The Enemy

There is, indeed, a silver van on the streets where the town starts to give way to the fields. It may not consciously know it's an urban animal, but it certainly seems to feel that those dark, wet spaces where the street-lights taper away are unknown territory. That there's no point going any further, especially not since it's so close to where Valentine intends to use the dirtier-than-dirty Red Uranium bomb. That must be why the car looks so nervous, not its usual cocky self.

It's trying to decide what to do. Whether it should intervene in the events of the next couple of hours, or get as far away as possible.

But the silver van has played its part. There are other resources to pick up where it left off. They should be here soon. Less than half a mile away, in the suburbs where everything's still made of concrete instead of mud, the people are already becoming aware of them. Light sleepers are woken by the sensation of something moving overhead, something that manifests itself not just in noise and displaced air but in a crackle of static which makes itself felt on every television screen it passes. Those few who are already awake have a tendency to move towards their windows, just checking that it isn't a rocket attack on the way. They're all disappointed.

Three shapes in the sky, nearly-visible in the nearly-light. Heading for the fields on the edge of town. Reinforcements arriving in time for the final face-off.

4.11 Such Knowledge

Horror has left the husk of the House of Marrero by now. She's standing, very still, on the gravel at the side of the road. Staring at the big heap of now-dormant metal in front of her. Inangela suspects that this is Horror's idea of maintenance. She's seen people standing at the side of the road working on broken-down cars, and wants to go through the same actions, but has no idea where on the machine's rusty, over-complicated body she should start. Her nipple-piercings are becoming visible as the rain gets into her t-shirt. It's not what Inangela needs to see right now.

Inangela herself walks back towards the van, quite slowly and as calmly as she can manage, carefully putting one exquisitely-booted foot in front of the other. At this point she seriously doesn't want to look rattled, even though turning her back on the ambulance was a challenge in itself. She feels it could go off at any minute.

By the time she reaches Horror, Horror still hasn't moved.

'Um,' she begins.

'Still doesn't work,' Horror reports.

'Um,' Inangela repeats. 'U-huh-hum.'

Horror looks at her with some curiosity.

'You don't fancy him, do you?' she asks.

'What?' says Inangela. 'No. Well… I don't know. No. Listen. Symbols. Writing. Ritual… things.'

'What about them?'

‘I’m… good with that kind of thing, aren’t I?’

Horror shrugs. To her, that’s like asking whether an invisible man’s good at juggling invisible balls.

‘I *know* about all that,’ Inangela persists. ‘Faction Paradox. Cult… material.’

‘Stuff,’ says Horror, using the word that Inangela’s been trying to avoid.

‘I know about it,’ Inangela concludes. ‘Don’t I?’

‘If you say so,’ says Horror.

Inangela tries to take this as a vote of supreme confidence.

‘Well,’ she says. ‘Well…’

4.12 Murder

The killing blow is beautiful.

DoppelTiffany has been expanding on her theory of the War as a mechanism of population control, although the lecture has been heavily punctuated with incidents of “y’know” and “like.” ‘People die,’ she points out at one stage. ‘It’s sad, yeah, but… stuff happens. It’s not like anyone really cares anyway. People die all the time. People get run over and starve to death and everything, no-one cares.’

‘But… are you saying it doesn’t matter?’ asks the interviewer, who’s surprised by all of this but professional. She’s probably aware that the footage will be broadcast over and over again in the next couple of weeks, so it’s one time she doesn’t want to mess things up. ‘You’re saying the War isn’t important…?’

‘I’m saying, nobody’s going to care about it now it’s got boring,’ DoppelTiffany explains, positively writhing in her seat and making her big smug smile just that tiny bit smugger. ‘It’s like that… you know that kid who died? The one who got all knifed up?’

Now even the interviewer’s starting to feel uneasy. This isn’t just a “pop star says too much while on drugs” incident any more.

‘Yeees,’ the woman says, cautiously.

‘It’s like that,’ says DoppelTiffany. ‘People get all upset ‘cause she got ripped open by some stalker or something. Hundreds of kids like that get bombed into crap in another country somewhere, nobody cares.’

‘But surely,’ says the interviewer, then clears her throat in order to give herself thinking time. Sensitivity has suddenly become a major issue. ‘But surely… you can’t be saying that it doesn’t matter… if a

fourteen-year-old girl is murdered…'

DoppelTiffany snorts. All versions of Tiffany tend to snort when they laugh. It's a design flaw.

'SHE WAS JUST ONE KID,' she says, and the words aren't loud but they're important enough to ripple through all her iterations. 'WHO GIVES A DAMN ABOUT ONE KID? SHE PROBABLY DESERVED IT ANYWAY.'

4.13 Echo

'She probably deserved it anyway,' says Inangela, believing she's talking about the House of Marrero, even though she's never called the van a "she" before.

'What?' says Horror.

4.14 The Outside World

' "She probably deserved it",' reporter A tells reporter B. (In fact they have names, as reporters tend to do, but we can assume that the same kind of conversation is taking place in various establishments at various sites around the world.)

'What?' says reporter B.

'That's what she said,' reporter A confirms. ' "She probably deserved it".'

'And *where* did you hear this?' says reporter B, whom—we're now imagining—is in some way reporter A's superior. Though at this moment they're just two people hanging around in the control room of a small-scale cable news channel, on what's been a slow night so far. Meaning, neither one of them is seated behind a desk.

Reporter A shrugs, as well she might. Where does anyone hear anything these days? With so many sources, so many channels and column inches, that it's hard to say where you heard it first or even whether you imagined hearing it. Everything becomes a rumour, in a world like this one. Things happen twice, or three times, or four times, since most events are anticipated long before they occur and only take on hard-core substance once there's official confirmation. No wonder so many of us are psychic.

At this stage, Tiffany Korta hasn't said anything at all. Is the media becoming aware she *might* say something, which is, after all, what the Executive is threatening? Is the world just waiting for the coin to fall one way or the other?

4.15 For Some Reason, Nobody Took Us Seriously

‘Look, he said something about a Ship,’ Inangela points out.

‘Oh,’ says Horror, not taking her eyes off the van.

‘I think he means a Ship of War.’

‘Uh-huh.’

Inangela does her best to growl. ‘Is there any chance of you showing an interest here? Red Mercury. Ship. This is important.’

Horror looks unphased. ‘You *said* we’d be running into things,’ she points out.

‘So? Aren’t you surprised I’m right? No, I mean… that I’m *really* right.’

But there’s no answer Horror can reasonably give to that. So it’s in the quiet, rain-sodden moments which follow that Inangela becomes aware of the noise, and when she turns—towards the distant outline of the town centre—she sees that the boy from the ambulance has noticed it, too. He’s standing by the side of his vehicle, the rain stamping the hairs down flat across his skull, with his eyes turned up to the clouds.

Three shafts of light, a brilliant, pallid blue against the half-light of the sky. They lurch from side to side over the skyline, always coming closer, but never in a straight line. You could compare them to drunks walking home from the pub, but at least drunks can be amusing and have a chance of falling over. There’s a purpose here. A sense of drive. Even from here, you can hear the sound they make as they chop the air around them into pieces. The *chud-chud-chud* that comes with machine-weather.

‘Helicopters,’ says Horror.

‘No,’ says the boy from the ambulance. Inangela’s surprised he can hear what they’re saying. Unless he wasn’t responding to Horror at all, of course, but his “no” sounded far too flat to be an exclamation of terror.

4.16 Sancho Panza

Inangela, like many people, is used to the sound of helicopters at night. For one thing, there’s a juvenile detention centre in town. It’s hardly maximum security, since escaped juvenile convicts inevitably have nowhere to go and tend to freeze half to death in shop doorways

while snivelling like children, but short-lived explorations over the wall are common. Sometimes the helicopters spend half the night sweeping the town centre, passing their spotlights over every side-street and every vehicle that displays the machine-body-language of a stolen car.

But out here on the borders… even if you're used to the patrols, there's something not at all right about seeing those big blue beams slicing across the landscape. Why would a helicopter be out here, further than even the most weather-proof teenager would run? Let alone three helicopters?

'He's right,' says Inangela. 'Those aren't helicopters. Not normal ones.'

Horror shades her eyes to look up at the sky, which is ridiculous, really. 'Right. So they're, what…?'

Inangela doesn't reply at once. She's thinking about the concept-rock version of the Faction's history. She's thinking about nameless enemies and the legends of the War.

'Oh, Christ,' is her final verdict. 'Look at them. Look where they're coming from.'

She turns to face Horror, but Horror still doesn't seem to be getting it.

'They're on the same path *we* took,' she explains, somewhat urgently, and this time not reigning her hand gestures in at all. 'They're coming across the town. From where we made the last mark. Where we did the last camera.'

'You mean, they're just coming across the town,' says Horror.

'*Why?*' asks Inangela, something which requires both hands as well as her voice. 'Why would they? Why would anyone come out here?'

'We did.'

'That's what I mean! Don't you get it? We were doing the ritual.'

'*You* were,' says Horror. 'What, you summoned up helicopters, did you?'

'They're not helicopters! Not normal ones.'

'Had to be helicopters, didn't it?' says Horror.

'What?'

'Y'know. Helicopters. Sort of like… windmills. Flying windmills.'

Inangela squints at her associate through the rain. She doesn't have time to ask what inspired Horror to say that, when Horror's never been known to read a book and is unlikely to have got the idea from a

movie. Instead, she turns back to watch the brilliant blue columns of light as they move from the town to the fields, and the *chud-chud-chud* grows louder accordingly.

She's in time to see the boy from the ambulance hurling himself back into the driver's seat of his vehicle. But she's not going to let him get away that easily.

4.17 Wings Spreading

The threat is more than implicit. It takes a master, or an Executive full of masters, to utterly cripple a celebrity's uber-form. Any idiot can start a few rumours to ham-string it, shrink it a little, make it stop growing, but to *really* hurt it—so that virtually nobody remains who might give it succour, at least not without turning it into a wretched, twisted, demonised thing—requires a great deal of forethought and a lot of resources.

How did Tiffany's Executive create this image, this foul-mouthed, smug-faced iteration which casually lounges around and discusses child murder? Tiffany has her own ideas. Anyone who understands what computer graphics can actually do, and how near to collapse society will be if the population figures it out *en masse*, might have another answer. The idea that at some point in the couple of days Tiffany has been drugged, brainwashed, primed, recorded and then de-programmed is also at least feasible, but the change in hairstyle might need some explaining.

You can probably think up your own rational solutions, so just take your pick.

The videoscreen is blank now. Dark, flat and empty, the same grey-blue as the sky. All the light's gone out of the arena, but the walls are still there, and the figures in the darkness, the bone-masks visible as dim splatches of white around the stage. From down on the floor of the arena, they're all Tiffany can see. Her only points of reference in this hopelessly symbolic darkness.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the Chief Executive's great antlered head glides forward. He's moves closer, and closer, and closer, until he stands right at the edge of the stage, looming over the increasingly inadequately-proportioned girl who skulks in the crater below him. He doesn't say a word. He doesn't have to. Tiffany knows what her options are. The Executive has no particular interest in destroying such a promising uber-form, but really… she's not leaving it any option.

Yes. Tiffany knows. That hard-wired human fear of death, brought

on by this touching display of primal, bestial skulls, is behind her now. Her flesh and blood, her last links to the Pit, are hardly an issue. And isn't that what "initiation" means? They can try to change her into something awful, sick and utterly unloved, but at the end of the day… at the end of the day, she thinks about the stock answers she gives in every interview and the answers the evil DoppelTiffany gives, and knows the evil answers are at least occasionally *interesting*, and wonders if DoppelTiffany is in some way connected to this fragile little core-body of hers after all.

She also remembers what Miss Ruth showed her. She knows the "real" her is big enough, impressive enough, to embrace even the evil version of Tiffany in its wings. The Executive has no idea. It might have started this whole project, to turn her into a virtual entity for its own convenience, but its plans for her are so limited compared to the maybe-infinite potential she's seen in eyes of the insect.

'Tiffany—' says Mother Nod, at the last-possible-moment-but-one.

'*Tiffany*—' says Father Danzael, at the last-possible-moment.

'No,' says Tiffany.

The decision has been made. The initiation is complete. Two Tiffanies collide.

4.18 And So Do Worlds

One thing leads to another. A goes to B goes to C, and once you've reached… oh, let's call it K… then Z is pretty much inevitable.

Valentine lands in the driver's seat and runs his hand all the way from his eyes to the back of his head, clearing the rainwater out of his face and using it to slick back his hair. He has no idea how things got this far, and he'll probably laugh about it eventually. Probably in the last few seconds before the nuclear device immolates him and he really *doesn't* have to make any more decisions. He has the bomb. He has to use it before anyone stops him. It'd be perfectly logical, if it weren't so bizarre.

He tries to slam the driver's door of the ambulance shut, but finds that he can't.

The Leather Coat girl is standing there, between the door and the frame, one hand on each. She's leaning forward, obviously trying to look urgent even in spite of the rain that's spitting into her eyes and making her blink.

Funny, really. The use of the bomb is pretty much inevitable, but he has absolutely no idea how to deal with this. What's he supposed to

do? Tell her to let go? No, that won't work. Kick her away? No, that'd be rude. (Rude, thinks the boy with the bomb.)

'We need your help,' she tells him.

'Ahhhm,' says Valentine. 'No. You… don't understand…'

'They're coming for us,' the girl snaps.

Valentine realises she's glancing up at the sky as she speaks, and behind the thrumm of the engine and the patter-song of the rain he can still hear that ever-growing chud-chud-chud.

'No they're not,' he says, without really meaning to.

'Yes they are,' says the girl, automatically. Then her brow crinkles up and her nose wrinkles. It's really quite appealing. 'What d'you mean, no they're not?'

Something in Valentine's blood, probably taken from Coz, is making his hand shake and telling him to reach for the gearstick.

'Why… do you think… they're coming for you?' he asks.

The girl shakes her head. 'It's complicated. It's a ritual, you wouldn't understand.'

'Ritual?'

'You wouldn't understand.'

Now Valentine's the one shaking his head. 'They're not after you, they're…'

He tails off, or tries to, mostly because he knows that if he says it out loud, he'll *really* cross a line of paranoia. But the girl is staring at him, held tilted slightly to one side, demanding answers.

'Yes?' she prompts.

4.19 Valentine and the Faction (3)

The last Demonstration Day, again. Fourteen months ago, again.

There were a lot of angry people in the pub. That wasn't surprising. Most of them were members of one of the more vocal, dedicated but ultimately fruitless activist groups, something to do with Common Rights for Society or Rights for a Common Society or the Society for the Common Right, one of those. Its members looked as though they *should* be found in pubs. Mostly men, mostly broad-shouldered and beer-heavy, and mostly with thick, raised-on-the-soil beards. They liked giving rousing speeches, or interrupting each others' rousing speeches over a few pints, or grumbling in a menacing and conspiratorial fashion when they had a common enemy. They'd been

cut off from the speaker's platforms by the police, just like Valentine, and they'd somehow stayed together as a single political unit (ah, fraternity) despite the best efforts of the authorities to split them up.

By the time Valentine limped into the pub, with his leg wound patched up and disinfected by one of the few ambulances that followed the police "in case of trouble," the Rights people had already been grumbling for some time. There were half a dozen of them jammed into a wood-panelled alcove near the bar, and Valentine hovered nearby while he waited for his vodka and Globalised Coke. Their leader, the most bearded and beer-heavy of them all, had twitchy, blood-flecked eyes which made it quite clear he could happily bite the chin of any member of the ruling classes who got in his way.

'What they expect people to do?' this King Troll among Men was growling, savaging the atmosphere around him with every word. 'What do they think's going to happen? Ehh? They think people will just stop talking to each other, is that it?'

The one female member of the group, at the back of the alcove and just out of Valentine's earshot, said something which involved the words "desperate" and "conscience." It was wise enough to make most of the others nod among themselves.

'Chrrrr*ist*,' said King Troll, by way of agreement. 'They don't listen to a word anyone says, they try to stop us talking to each other, and then they act surprised when the fucking *terrorists* have a go at them.'

(A leads to B leads to C, remember. At this point Valentine had only just gone from C to D as a result of the day's events, so "terrorism" was still far, far beyond him.)

'All the groups are going to get less visible, that's all,' suggested a shorter, slimmer, more bespectacled member of the assembly, and not unreasonably. 'There won't be so many solid, um… solid…'

'Divisions?' someone suggested.

King Troll snorted like a horse.

'Faction Paradox,' he said. He meant it in a sneering kind of way, and everyone seemed to know what he meant, so evidently the Society had already talked it over and decided it wasn't a subject worth debating again. Valentine, hearing the name for the first time, just thought it was an odd title for a protest group.

Nonetheless. D to E.

4.20 Faster than a Magic Bullet

Outside the cinema complex, on the edge of the concrete part of

town, there's a fried food emporium that's several evolutionary stages beyond being a fish-and-chip shop. The emporium's closed right now, but its aura remains. As the flying machines sweep their lights across the plaza, and churn up the air, they create an entire wavefront of deep-fried oxygen. It rolls across the landscape in front of the three pale blue spotlights, announcing their presence long before the *chud-chud-chud* becomes deafening.

The wavefront hits Inangela as she reaches the ambulance's rear doors, and it's a wonderful and terrible thing to experience. The rain is panicking, beating at her face as the helicopter-blades (or whatever they may be) blow the storm towards her, but even as the drops pick at her eyes it's hard not to think about her stomach. You'd think the machines were trying to tempt her to stay here.

Horror is running to join her, now. Horror doesn't often run. Her feet look heavy, and… well… annoyed. The rest of her appears equally grumpy.

'What the fuck's going on?' she shouts, long before she reaches the ambulance.

'He's giving us a lift,' Inangela shouts back. She declines to explain how she talked Ambulance Boy into it.

Horror comes to a halt in front of Inangela, but she still has to yell to be heard over the sound of the machines and the sound of the rainfall. 'What about the van?'

Inangela shakes her head, and points a thumb at the sky. 'Leave it.'

'It's my van!'

'We don't have time,' Inangela shouts.

(She doesn't express the thought that's been bothering her most, these past few minutes. The House of Marrero is the instrument, the *magic bullet* if you will, that's been performing this ritual—a ritual so loaded with meaning it's even capable of bringing the enemy forces down out of the sky. It's an object of significance, and Inangela hopes future generations of ritualist will garland the corpse with flowers. Which begs the question… how significant must this ambulance be, if it's now become the centre of attention? If the House has indeed passed on its power in the alchemical marriage of the collision?)

'For Christ's sake!' shouts Horror. 'They're just helicopters!'

'They are *not*…' begins Inangela, then realises there's no point and no time. 'Look, I'm going in the ambulance. The House isn't going anywhere anyway, you might as well come.'

'And you really think they're after you.'

‘Yeah. But the driver thinks they’re after *him*.’

‘Oh, for… they might just be after Tiffany Korta’s autograph for all you know.’

‘Don’t be stupid.’

Horror glares at her. Tries to glare. The rain slaps her about the face as a punishment for this. Inangela looks back along the road, sees that the nearest of the blue columns of light is now moving straight ahead, not even weaving from side to side. The driver of the ambulance revs the engine, anxiously.

‘Trust me,’ she tells Horror, as she grasps the handles on the rear doors of the ambulance and wrenches them open.

Her resolve falters, ever so slightly, when she sees there’s a body in the back.

4.21 It Begins (1)

Since the *Angel* bar officially closed five hours ago, with much of the intervening time spent arguing with Ricky about which of the five members of Girl Party is the attractive one, Gareth “Foxy” Taylor takes the more discreet back door out of the building. Not that anyone’s checking, but it’s the way of things.

Exposed to the air, the first thing he does is make a note to write a column pointing out that Kirsten is obviously the attractive one out of Girl Party, and only a homosexual would think otherwise. The second thing he does is reach for his pocket. He always turns off his ‘phone when he’s in a pub—it makes a bad impression if an editor can hear some prole chanting ‘Gar-eth’s-a-bas-tard!’ in the background. Still, he’s surprised by the number of messages he’s had in the last few hours, most of them from the same person. Entertainment editor of the *Sun*. Apart from frequent bursts of, ‘Where the fuck are you?’, the only thing Gareth picks up from the messages is that it’s something to do with the ‘Tiffany Korta thing.’

Her pelvis has probably waddled off to get a solo career, thinks Gareth. Then he calls back.

He barely gets the chance to say ‘what’s up?’ before the entertainment editor begins rattling at him at a frantic, panicked tempo that’s commonly known in the newspaper business as “Diana Blue.” Gareth listens, and takes in as much as he can, but once the editor comes to a stop he still has a few questions.

‘You *what*?’ he asks.

Ent-Ed gives him the salient points again. Gareth attempts to be

more incisive.

'She said this *when*?' he tries.

It was on one of the major continental satellite networks, the editor says, or at least that's what he's heard. But the footage was already third-hand by then and half a dozen networks are claiming to have broadcast the interview hours earlier. Or even days earlier. Details are hard to come by.

'Well, she's fucked up *this* time,' Gareth notes. Sagely.

It's commonly believed that tabloid newspapers take pleasure in destroying celebrities, even that they go out of their way to set one up as a sacrifice. Not true. Destruction is bad for circulation. A disgraced celebrity who carries on regardless is, by contrast, a goldmine. A male teen pop idol found in a gay sauna will always have that extra-special frisson attached to his name, and will always make good headlines. Gareth "Foxy" Taylor feels a certain kind of excitement at the news of Tiffany Korta's fall from grace, it's true, but it's not the leering sadism that Tiffany herself might expect. It's a much more specific, much more focused kind of urge. And like a salmon in mating-season, Gareth knows the feeling's never going to be truly *complete* until he reaches a very specific point in the town's topography.

But he's tired and he's newly sober and his legs are aching under the weight of a reasonably impressive belly. So is the pull of the new centre of the universe strong enough to draw him in?

4.22 It Begins (2)

Already, the Tiffany Korta interview footage has made it halfway around the world. Not the geographical world, of course, which would hardly be fitting. It's reached the furthest-flung lands, provided those lands welcome the major satellite corporations, but it hasn't yet penetrated those nearby and serious-minded communities which consider celebrity news beneath them. It'll penetrate eventually, oh yes it will.

The pedigree of the footage is unclear, as nobody has made any suggestion as to who conducted the original interview. Evidence suggests it was first shown on a satellite station based a long, long way from the town where Tiffany's currently supposed to be appearing, but the reference to the butchered teenage girl—a major issue in the town, a lesser story elsewhere—indicates it was filmed in these parts. Already the media's sending extra troops into the area, the reinforcements wholly unaware that by entering town limits they're crossing the lines of Inangela's unfinished pentagram. Many teams of

reporters, knowing *without a shadow of doubt* that a very big star is going to be utterly wrenched out of shape in the next few hours, are already setting themselves up at strategic points across the territory. Though the footage hasn't yet been broadcast, one team of reporters is said to have tracked down the murdered girl's father to ask how he feels about this unexpected big-name insensitivity. Rumour has it he's "devastated."

Those showbiz reporters already in town for the performance find themselves heading for the arena, so slowly, but inevitably, a cordon of cameras makes itself felt around the barrier. There's no definite reason for them to be led there, any more than there was a definite reason for Tiffany to be led there by Inangela's spit-ritual; it's just circumstance, circumstance and psychology 101. Nobody knows where Tiffany herself is. Her management isn't talking. With nowhere else to go, the reporters gravitate towards this navel of the entertainment world, sensing that if the new, terrible, malformed and monstrous Tiffany makes herself visible, she'll manifest herself here.

"Murdered girl" is interesting, "major pop star tramples on grave of murdered girl" is unprecedented. Surely, this is today's big story, and probably tomorrow's as well? It's difficult to imagine anything knocking this off the front page.

4.23 Inangela's Question

The *chud-chud-chud* of the engines isn't so bad, here in the back of the ambulance, but the sound of the rain is worse. Inangela tries to stare out of one of the glass panels in the rear doors, through the wire mesh, but the ambulance lurches from side to side as the driver accelerates away from the crash site and it's hard to focus. Inangela sees, or thinks she sees, one of the blue columns of light sweep over the black, worn-out husk of the House of Marrero. She overbalances, and falls to the floor before she can establish the van's fate.

It's like watching a friend being dragged off by the police. And Inangela should know.

Horror is crouching nearby, her fat backside squeezed between a piece of complicated medical equipment and a black metal box which presumably contains more complicated medical equipment. It's not often you see Horror looking like this. Pissed off, as well as soaking wet. She looks like a child who's sulking about the fact that someone's rescued her from drowning. Her gaze is fixed on the body, but it's as if she's just daring it to get up and surprise everyone.

Oh yes. The body. The worst thing, really, is that the girl doesn't

look wholly dead. She's not moving, and the bone-mask is suitably corpsified, but the ambulance's movement makes her roll to and fro on her stretcher. Inangela wonders, briefly, whether this is what *she* looks like to other people. Well, apart from the fact that the girl on the stretcher is hopelessly skinny. She also notes the ersatz Faction Paradox mask isn't as good as her own.

Inangela kneels next to the stretcher, and wipes her hand against the inside of her jacket, just because it seems ill-fitting to touch the dead or dying with wet fingers. Carefully, she extends her hand towards the fallen girl's neck. Isn't that where you're supposed to check for life-signs? The neck?

'You, ahh, shouldn't do that,' says the driver.

Inangela freezes, but she freezes with her fingers on the girl's throat. When she looks up she sees the driver's eyes in the rear-view mirror, fixed right on her. His eyes are blue and the blue almost fills his sockets. He's got pupils like caviar. Once again she wonders if he stole this machine from someone, maybe an elderly relative who's actually qualified to drive it.

'Does she need to get to hospital?' asks Inangela.

There: hear it? The slightest hint, in her voice, that maybe the things in the sky are just helicopters and this vehicle really should be heading in the opposite direction.

4.24 Valentine's Conscience

'There's nothing we can do for her,' says Valentine. By "we" he means himself and Coz, not himself and his new passengers. He thinks of Coz's frequent, frenetic outbursts, the acts of aggression against the world in general and the constant, terrifying need to be somewhere else, and realises he's treating his divine mission to get to the target in time in exactly the same way Coz treats every night on the job. God, can you imagine that? Going through this every night. At least Valentine knows he can only die once.

The Leather Coat girl doesn't look convinced, and why should she? He could be lying, even he's not sure. In the rear view mirror, her reflection slowly moves its hand away from the girl in the mask.

'She's still alive,' says Leather Coat. Valentine isn't sure what to tell her.

'Where are we going?' asks the other girl, the one with the spiky red hair that makes her look like a rat now it's soaked through.

Valentine isn't sure what to say to that, either.

‘Not to hospital?’ asks Leather Coat.

Valentine shakes his head. ‘There’s… things,’ he tries. ‘That I’ve got to do. First.’

No reply from the back. But from here he can only see what Leather Coat’s doing, he can’t see the other one. And… isn’t the other one closer to the box?

You know. The *box*.

He turns his head without thinking about it, looks over his shoulder to find the rat-girl looking back at him, with a wholly uninterested expression on her face. The box is just where it was, squashed against her hips while she squats on the floor.

It makes him wonder, all of a sudden, whether there’s enough radiation in the air to do his passengers any damage.

Which makes him wonder what he’s going to do, when he arrives at the target and has to detonate the device with two bystanders in the area.

He’s been staring at the box for at least seven seconds. Now Leather Coat, obviously the smart one of the pair, has noticed what he’s doing and has started staring at the box as well. Valentine’s eyes flick back to the road ahead. Then to the rear-view mirror, briefly, where he finds the girl’s eyes looking right back at him. Then back to the road. Yes. Stick with the road.

4.25 North

‘You’re saying the War isn’t important…?’

‘I’m saying, nobody’s going to care about it now it’s got boring. It’s like that… you know that kid who died? The one who got all knifed up?’

At the gleaming white all-nite stopover, where all great journeys of discovery begin, there’s a new customer standing in front of the pay-desk. Nobody important. Just an average motorist who happens to be on the roads at a non-average time, either the last of those coming home from a long night out or the first of those heading for an early shift at work. He’s wearing a rumpled suit, so it could go either way. He’s just come in to pay for the fuel, and maybe pick up some crab-sticks into the bargain.

There’s a pause, though, as both he and the boy behind the counter look up at the TV screen in the corner. Evil Tiffany, with her come-on-I-dare-you smile and her sensuous, leathery wriggling.

‘Unbelievable, innit?’ says the boy.

‘Saw it earlier,’ says the customer. ‘It was on one of the foreign channels. Yesterday afternoon.’ (A-hah! He thinks of the previous afternoon as yesterday, not today, which is technically correct. Therefore he’s up early, not going to bed late.)

‘Dunno why she thinks she can say stuff like that,’ the boy points out.

‘Celebrities,’ says the man, as if that’s a world of answers in itself. And it is, when you think about it. ‘They don’t live in the real world.’

4.26 The Birth Pains of the New Tiffany Korta

They call this place a “megastore,” meaning it supplies young people with everything they might want—short of sex, cigarettes and a way out of this town (although substitutes for at least two of these three things *are* commercially available, if you want to check the bright silver space-age racks full of imaginary boys, imaginary girls and lifestyles which—ecology dictates—are really only attainable by one individual in 120,000). Its patrons might not know it, but these open, plush-carpeted, exquisitely air-conditioned aisles, with their endless products and images and possibilities, are built to hit a very specific trigger. They make teenagers feel like executives, or even Executives. Masters of their environment. Kings of the culture. In here they can have anything. They can climb to the top level of the shop, look down from the grand balcony that overlooks the lower levels and survey the whole wide world, or rather, the one part of the world they care about.

But not right now. Right now the shop is closed. The escalators are still, the strip-lights are off, the adolescent Executive is not patrolling its domain. The only lit sections of the building are the windows.

As Valentine knows all too well, one of the main windows contains an ad display of Tiffany Korta. It’s been well over two months since her last release, seven weeks since the display was first taken down, but the ones who run this place were wise enough to put it in storage until her long-awaited arrival in this town. Now there she is again, in her geisha-face, made up in bone-white and spread out like a sacrifice (the last of her four chief postures) on an endlessly large bed of blue silk. Smaller images surround it, CD covers blown up to the size of antique LPs, three albums giving her three quite distinct faces. All of them looking out onto the street.

All of them keep their expressions fixed as the litter-bin is thrown through he window, so it’s safe to say none of them saw it coming.

It's not an organised, pre-meditated display of anger. If it were, the person responsible would have brought a brick. The litter-bin just happened to be on the street corner, heavy and metallic and begging to be thrown. Hurled, even. Shattering the window with such force that not a single shard of glass remains in the frame, hitting Tiffany's image dead-on and snapping the cardboard centrepiece in two.

The megastore is the largest shop in town that caters for the junior executive, but it's not the only one. There are other places which decided to use Tiffany Korta's image to pump up their business a little. So far the megastore's been lucky. A few minutes from now, two of the other shops will be introduced to the Molotov Cocktail, and let's not forget that it isn't even five o'clock yet. Heaven knows what'll happen when the locals wake up to the interview footage on the breakfast news.

4.27 Inangela's Logic

Through the glass in the ambulance's rear door, on the other side of the wire mesh that's designed to stop drunks putting their fists *all* the way through the window, there's only one column of light to be seen. Inangela's guess is that the flying machines are hovering over the spot where the House of Marrero died, picking over the carcass, one of them prodding at the remains with its big blue spotlight while the other two wait for their leader to finish. She wonders if the helicopter-things can pick up her scent from the van, or her DNA, or if they'll scrape her saliva from the fillet-o-fish carton and use it to perform machine-voodoo.

The important thing is, there's some distance now between the ambulance and its predators. Which is good, because there's something she's really, really got to do.

She checks the rear-view mirror on the other side of the driver's seat. Ambulance Boy isn't looking her way, at least not at this exact moment. His eyes are fixed on the road, determined not to acknowledge her presence. Fine, you bastard.

She shifts her weight towards the metal box. Horror, who's crouched between Inangela and the box in question, shuffles her feet in an irritable fashion.

Now, what she *really* wants to know is who this mysterious driver is, this boy who looks like he's stolen the uniform and has Red Mercury containers in the front of his vehicle, who runs from the enemies of the true Faction Paradox as if it's him they're after. He's got no reason to answer any of her questions, though. What he *has* got

is a compulsive urge to stare at the box, suggesting it's the important one here.

The box lid is big, clunky and metallic, only protected by a single flimsy catch. One shove should open it up and reveal its secrets to the world.

On the count of three. One. Two.

No, hold on.

There's something about this that Inangela doesn't like. Red Mercury, i.e. poison. A big metal box, suggestive of the kind of thing you'd see stored away in the most tightly-guarded cupboard of a school science department, marked with radiation warnings and accessible only to the staff or the particularly adept lock-picks in the class. Something about it she *doesn't* like? To Hell with it. Something about it she finds as appealing as being caught up in the War itself, as appealing as experiencing a life-threatening disease but surviving it, as appealing as anything that makes you feel you're surviving the world rather than seeing it all at second-hand.

She finds herself reaching for the Faction mask, tucked away in the dark, clammy space under her arm. She takes one more look at the mirror before she puts it on, and Ambulance Boy is looking her way, but he stops it as soon as he sees he's been seen.

Wearing the mask in front of the dying-girl is a strange experience —almost like mocking the sick, especially since Inangela's mask is palpably superior. Horror, meanwhile, just gives her something which would—if Horror had a little more energy—be classified as a withering look. Obviously she doesn't understand the totem-protection that the mask offers (well, you think of any artefact more likely to shield you from the fall-out of a ritual focus like Red Mercury).

Right then. Protection in place. On the count of three.

One.

Two.

4.28 Valentine's Target

There it is. Up ahead. The same as it was six hours ago, when Coz was driving and the ambulance had to roll up to the venue through an outer layer of people, vehicles and dirt. The wall of the arena, rising up out the field, site of the town's second-ever public appearance by Tiffany Korta and—for entirely different reasons—the target for the Red Uranium bomb.

But that's just it. It really *does* look the same as it did at midnight, if

you can ignore the fact that the sky's a little lighter and the fact that the rain's turning the dirt to mud. The plan, originally, was to get here once the last few people were leaving. Once nobody was around except for audience stragglers and bored lighting technicians. The ambulance was supposed to be perfect cover, a good way of (a) transporting the bomb and (b) disguising it if too many bystanders were still cluttering up the area. By this time of morning the site should be deserted. It doesn't matter how many times Valentine's imagined doing this in the last few hours, or how many times he's pieced together the possible circumstances of his own self-immolation, the one thing he was sure of was that nobody should be here.

There are cars parked all around the arena wall, you can tell even from this distance. Cars and vans. A ring of lights surrounding the perimeter, tiny little glowing pin-pricks, bobbing around as if they haven't quite decided where to settle.

'This time,' he hears a voice mutter, somewhere behind him. One of the girls. Leather Coat. Her voice sounds muffled, for some reason. 'This time, definitely.'

Valentine feels the ambulance slow down even though he doesn't remember telling it to. There shouldn't be civilians around. (People—he means people. He only thinks the word "civilians" because he's thinking about "civilian casualties.")

'One,' says the voice of Leather Coat. Even now, with his mind quite specifically on other things, Valentine realises she doesn't even know she's speaking out loud. She's almost as distracted as he is.

People. Civilians. Here and now. Why?

'Two,' the girl mumbles.

Surely they don't know what's happening?

Chank, goes the lid of the box behind the passenger seat.

4.29 Counter-Culture

Waco Black is, by his own testimony, a dangerous man. You can tell he's a dangerous man just by looking at him. He has long black hair, wears black mascara EVEN THOUGH HE'S A BOY!!!!!!!! and paints his fingernails as black as his stage name. When he opens his mouth, he sings songs which explain that modern society is shit and that ordinary, stupid people with their ordinary, stupid lives are nowhere near as disturbing or cutting-edge or attractive as himself and his fans. He used to end his stage act by burning the flag of his home nation, but then there was a major terror attack on his home nation so he

stopped doing it in case it lost him a little too *much* mainstream support. He is, nonetheless, considered subversive. In his way.

It must rankle, then, that a 'media whore' (his own words, c. last summer) like Tiffany Korta is now more shocking than he is. His immediate reaction to this, at around half past four in the morning by the town's time but the previous evening by the clock of his own country, is to come out on her side. He only gives his opinions to the cameras which record his views, not the live ones, as he knows there won't be a censorship problem that way.

'It's all ****ing true,' he tells his countrymen, in his carefully-cultivated lazy-lizard voice. 'The War's just a pile of ***. It doesn't matter. So people die. So what? People die all the ***ing time. It's no big deal.'

The interviewer asks him how he feels about the next part of Ms. Korta's statement, regarding the murdered schoolgirl. Waco admittedly knows he's got to be careful here, so:

'I don't know about that,' he says, dismissing it with a wave of his well-manicured claws. 'That's got nothing to do with me. That's, y'know, somebody else's problem.'

It's not terribly profound, but it sets the tone. Before now the rest of Tiffany's species were wary of speaking out, one way or another. Now the way is clear. Soon, almost everyone in the entertainment business with a half-decent agent will force their way in front of a camera to not-speak their minds. Interestingly, most of them will use exactly the same measured responses to Tiffany's outbursts that they use when asked about the War. They'll say it's 'a shame.' Some will suggest it's to do with 'stress,' with as much sympathy for her as they feel they can afford.

A few, the more conservative ones, will go further. They know they have nothing to fear from good taste, and are prepared to describe Tiffany's statements—in their own fractured vernacular—as a 'disgrace.' You'd think there were battle-lines being drawn.

4.30 Valentine's Struggle with the Powers of Darkness

It really did happen very quickly.

The sound of the box opening, of the lid swinging back on its heavy metal hinges and slapping against the side of the ambulance, was… what? Half a second long? Less? Valentine's head had snapped around to look before it was even over. He now has a powerful, indelible

memory of seeing someone staring down at the open box, looking like the woman who found Moses in the rushes. Someone with bone for a face. His first thought was of the dead girl—up from her stretcher at last, ready to start the chain reaction early, saying *to Hell with you, if you're going to let me die then I'm dying in the big bang and I'm not going to let you back out just because there are bystanders around*. In rough terms, it took as long for him to realise the truth as it did for the Leather Coat girl to realise what she was looking at.

In those few seconds, while Valentine's hands weren't exactly on the wheel, the ambulance lurched into the middle of the road. There was another vehicle coming up behind it, and there was the sound of a horn and the skryking of brakes and suddenly Valentine re-discovered the ability to panic. He's fairly sure he was on the verge of getting the vehicle back under control, when suddenly something black and leathery and smelling of cow-hide and fried food hauled itself out of the back of the ambulance towards him. Scrabbling over him as he scrabbled over the wheel, until his fingers slipped off the rubber grip, and more shrieks of angry traffic came from outside as the tyres tried to make sense of the mud and the rain.

The girl in the Leather Coat didn't miss her chance. She spent those first few seconds, before he had an opportunity to defend himself, roundly punching him in the face and the neck. You could hear her friend somewhere in the distance, swearing at random and obviously not understanding any of this, until Leather Coat started shouting at her to help. By the time the ambulance came to a full stop, Leather Coat's full weight was pinning him down with his skull pressed against the inside door and the second girl was trying to clamber into the passenger seat.

You don't realise how tired you are, or how pushed your body is, until you've got a 170-pound woman on top of you.

Valentine's stopped struggling now. There's the occasional sound of a passing engine from outside, but mostly just the dull slapping of the rain. He's trying to breathe normally, or as normally as he can, with his arms pinned against the seat and the girl's knee in his ribcage. She's trying to breathe normally, too. Her friend occasionally furnishes the situation with the all-purpose murmur of 'shit,' but you can tell they're waiting for everything to calm down. Making sure that nobody outside the ambulance pulls up to ask what's going on, that the bomb doesn't go off unexpectedly, that Valentine doesn't start struggling again.

None of these things happen. All players involved get their breaths back. Valentine, with his head twisted to one side against the door, can see a black plastic seat-cover out of one eye and the looming,

blank-eyed face of the girl's mask out of the other.

4.31 Inangela's Conclusion

'All right,' says Inangela, once Ambulance Boy has stopped squirming and she feels she's done enough superficial damage to his cod-eyed, stubble-ridden face to convince him she's dangerous. 'All right. That's a bomb, isn't it? That's not just Red Mercury or anything. That's a *bomb*.'

Horror swears again, although nobody's listening.

4.32 The Devil

Most of the world, or at least the geographically closest parts of the world, hasn't heard about the Tiffany Korta debacle yet. Most of the people likely to be incensed are still in bed. The reporters are planning on taking full advantage of this, hoarding up an enormous stockpile of material in time for the ever-critical breakfast news.

Tiffany's management has issued the expected 'no comment' (protocol dictates at least another half-hour pass before anything more is said), and there's an unspecified but mythically huge bounty for the first reporter who tracks her down.

Need it be said there have been sightings? At least two people vaguely connected with the media 'phoned in to say that a girl matching Tiffany's description, complete with retro-pants and forehead-stud, has been seen walking the streets of the town with the kind of blissed-out expression one expects from drug casualties. These reports make each other unreliable, as they come from opposite sides of the town, but it does re-raise the 'Has she been on drugs?' question. There's the expectation that her management will eventually blame the euphemistic "stress," and probably try to bribe the dead fourteen-year-old's family.

It's around this time that news of the megastore incident comes in. Strange how that one litter-bin through the window seems to carry so much more significance than an entire suburb being incinerated in a rocket attack… no, actually it isn't strange at all. Only if you listen to the reports very, very carefully do you catch the subtext.

A foreign celebrity, rolling into town and claiming a local child deserved to be slaughtered like a food-animal, presses even more of the wrong buttons than you might think. Race becomes an issue as well as sensitivity. The community feels its skin prickle, and rallies to defend its children. This event, this ceremonial breaking of the

windows, only makes sense within the context of this town. For now.

4.33 Sequitur, #2

Another half-conversation, out of the past. Another piece of unheard testimony. The voice says:

'Ahhhh… Orphée.'

'I, ahh… I got the message. The letter.

'It's… you've arranged everything, yeah? You want me to, to start setting up the… the thing. With the ambulance.

'Yeah. No, I mean… no. I wanted to check, that's all. I wanted to make sure you know. What I said, when we started… I still mean what I said. If it was just about the bomb then… no, look. I just mean, what I said before, it's still true. I don't want to go through with this if there's going to be… you know.

'Yeah, wait, listen. I know people are going to get hurt. I *know* that. But… I want to make sure the timing's right. I don't want to do more damage than I have to. That's what I'm saying.

'And… you've got everything? You can get everything? The, uh…

'And you still want me to, to collect it all?

'I might need help, that's all. Putting it together.

'No, I mean… not help. Information. More information. I can work a soldering iron and everything.

'So everything's done? Everything's ready?

'I can do that. I've got… there's another driver I have to lose somewhere, but I can do that. I can pick the stuff up in time.

'And the… the thing. The clock. Timer. I need to fix the timer. Do you want me to…

'And… that's it?

'You're sure? I mean, the… the bomb. You're sure it'll work. You're sure it'll, it'll do. What it's supposed to do.

'Even to a Ship? We don't know. *I* don't know. What the Ship's made of and how it works and everything. Whether the bomb's really going to do the damage to—

'And what about afterwards?

'The… side-effects. If nobody's done this. To a Ship. With a bomb like this. It could just… it could just *do* things. Even if it's buried. Worse than the bomb.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know. I’m not trying to back out, that’s… not what I meant.

‘I… want to be sure nothing’s going to happen. I want to be sure the bomb doesn’t do any, any more damage. Except to the Ship. I need your guarantee on that.

‘And maybe… okay, maybe to anyone who’s close enough, but… I need to know there’s not going to be anything else. I need to be sure I can trust you about that.

‘I need to be sure. That’s all I want.’

4.34 The Lost

So here’s the Hollywood pitch, as promised.

It’s called *Ship of the Lost*, and the one-line version is that it’s about a Ship of War that crash-lands in the middle of a backwater community during a heroic anti-terror operation. The locals are all primitive folk, mostly played by British character actors, and have no idea what a crashed Ship actually means. They still think of it as a product of a War in Heaven, bless ‘em, and they have no idea that the individuals who sent the Ship there were just trying to protect them from the evil machinations of the Enemy forces.

The locals have already turned the crash site into a primitive place of worship, where their young Queen, said to be a goddess on Earth, sits on her grand throne. (Queen to be played by a suitably blonde, pierced and tribal pop star, to be announced at a later date.) Inevitably there’ll be a romantic connection between her and one of the male leads. See below.

Much of the plot is a race against time to get to the crashed Ship before the forces of evil. Here the forces of evil are represented by an international terrorist who is, in fact, in the employ of a sinister death-cult. His plan is to detonate a nuclear device at the site of the Ship, causing the vessel’s reactor to “go critical” (all the science that’s required) and trigger an explosion capable of killing millions. No, make it billions. He’s doing this purely in order to discredit the Ship’s owners, even though—as the film underlines—they’re technologically and therefore morally superior to the locals, who can’t run their own society without the benevolent intervention of higher powers.

In one key scene, the terrorist explains this scheme to two of the buxom, good-natured-yet-superstitious local women. He claims that the Ship’s destruction, which he describes as being much like the “evil underground god” of local legend, will hurt nobody except the people closest to it. The Ship buried itself on impact, as Ships tend to do, so

the nuclear reaction will be relatively harmless. But this is bunk, as the Masters of the War explain to the heroes during the "briefing" scene. The detonation will cause a chain reaction in all four of the Ship's dimensions. The vessel's reactor has already begun to leak into the soil, causing unusual mutations in the populace just in case extra "monster" scenes are required. Reporters investigating the crash site have already begun to lose their minds and turn into snarling, self-devouring animals.

The question is, does the terrorist really believe the explosion will be harmless—or is he simply insane? If the latter, then is he insane enough to trigger the bomb while he's still in its vicinity?

So far, the only characters left uncast in this scenario are the heroes. We know they're bound to carry guns, and that they're likely to arrive on the scene in helicopters, or perhaps suitably militaristic Ships of their own. We can also make an educated guess that they'll prevail in the end, and that the terrorist will die in a suitably ironic fashion (even *he* seems to know this, so he must know movies), but the supporting cast can't be so certain.

Probability dictates one of the poor, plump, misguided locals will meet her end in a tragic manner, possibly causing the other to see through the terrorist's web of lies and turn against him.

This thing writes itself.

4.35 Valentine's Version (Same Plot):

A nuclear explosion triggered inside the body of a Ship of War will be contained—as much as a nuclear explosion ever can be.

Ships are engineered to be indestructible, however delicately-balanced their internal machineries are. Just as an external nuclear attack would be incapable of cracking open the hull (or so the Faction has claimed), an internal explosion will rupture the oh-so-complicated cat's-cradle of dimensional technology within the Ship but leave its exterior almost intact.

The internal damage will still have a serious impact on the outside world, however. It's in a Ship's nature to root itself into its current environment, a form of high-grade stealth technology that not only renders it chameleon-invisible but allows it to tap the most tactically-significant points of the local landscape, be they topographic, magnetic or even cultural. The explosion will cause a critical imbalance in its systems. Its fuel, which goes as far beyond normal-nuclear as normal-nuclear goes beyond the burning of fossils, will vent itself into the local environment. Valentine initially imagined this as

something like an air-crash in four dimensions, but the Faction has assured him that the effect of one simple internal explosion, however grand, won't be quite so appalling.

It'll certainly be dramatic, or there'd be no point. It won't, however, be World War Three. If indeed this current War doesn't qualify as World War Three, given it affects most of the world by now.

Will the rupturing of the Ship kill people? Almost certainly: by now the vessel's so well-rooted that someone, somewhere, is bound to feel the impact as it goes through its death-throes. Will it kill Valentine, who'll be closer to the detonation than anybody? It's entirely possible, but that's another issue. These are things he tries to see as remote and inconsequential. What's more important is what comes next.

The Ship's death-rattle will be felt, not simply as an earthquake or as a vast magnetic disturbance but as a profound *event*. Valentine knows, instinctively, this is true even if he also knows his understanding of Ship mechanics is as limited as everyone else's. These vessels of War have already hooked themselves into the world's consciousness. Awareness of them is universal, even if first-hand experience is rare to non-existent. When one dies, and the shriek of light and noise and horror rips through the nerves of anybody who's ever felt the sting of the modern world, then everyone will know. Everyone will see the true shape of the War. Everyone will see what might tentatively be described as the Truth.

So people will die, though Valentine admits he can't predict how. It may be as simple as a magnetic pulse, shutting down electrical systems and condemning anyone attached to life-support in any given hospital. Such a pulse could even wipe every videotape on the continent, a thought which Valentine secretly enjoys, because that'd *really* bring the horror of the War home to people. On the other hand, there could still be points where the nuclear reaction bursts out of the venting-ports, cracking open the skin of the world and burning… how many people? Hundreds? Thousands? More? Burning them away, and turning millions more into cancer-carriers.

It's worth it, surely? If the world sees the true shape of the War. If the world understands what lies underneath it. For that, Valentine would sacrifice himself and a thousand unseen, unnamed members of his own kind. Whatever he may call his own kind by now.

The question is, would he sacrifice the girl in the back of the ambulance?

4.36 Potlatch

Interesting thought, isn't it? What's most interesting is that Valentine thinks he's the only one who's figured it out.

The concept of "potlatch" is now not only well-known but positively fashionable. However, to recap: potlatch is a form of warfare traditionally fought by certain pre-colonial American tribes, in which each side will ceremonially give away, burn, shatter, sabotage or otherwise ruin its *own* property, leaving whole villages gutted, swathes of land poisoned by ash and great treasures broken into pieces. You can tell these people don't live in a hard-core capitalist economy. This is a war about *meaning*. He who gives up first, who refuses to bear the responsibility of decimating his own people's society, is essentially admitting he cares too much about his trinkets and his land to sacrifice them in the name of his own ideology.

Valentine is about to make his own sharp little bite-mark on the face of the town, even though he knows anyone who gets too close is going die, because he knows that by destroying his own people's property he can strengthen those people against the enemy… the enemy, in this case, being *anyone* who happens to be fighting this War. And can we really believe he's the first to try it? For all we know, the whole War's being fought this way. For all we know, wars might have been fought this way ever since the rise of the mass-media —ever since the sight of people lying dead or dying, with their bodies torn out of shape by enemy fire, became a more potent weapon than enemy fire itself. It's even possible there hasn't been a single "real" rocket attack since the 1930s, and that everything since has been part of a secret worldwide potlatch. Half the time Guernica was bombed by the fascists, half the time it was burned out at ground level by anti-fascists hoping to blame the fascists. They say Roosevelt knew Pearl Harbour was coming but kept quiet in order to draw his country into war; they say Churchill knew the bombing of Coventry was coming but kept quiet in order to keep a secret about a code; and as for the U.S.S. *Liberty*…

You want to know why this War is all signs and portents, ceremonies and sacrifices? Why the politicians can talk about every military action being a "blood offering" and nobody flinches? It's because the War has nothing to do with soldiers heroically giving up their lives on the battlefield. These sacrifices are made solely to create a *pattern*.

Valentine doesn't see himself as being part of this pattern.

4.37 The Distance

It happens on one of the leading satellite news channels, and this

time it stays there. Theirs is the exclusive, they've got copyright control and they're notoriously litigious, thanks very much.

Tiffany Korta is seen sitting in a chair, but it's not the same chair that was visible in the original interview footage, and this time there's a curtain of expertly-wrinkled blue silk behind her. The similarity to her last CD cover is striking. She looks much as she did for the previous interview, complete with dreadlocks, but for some reason the dreadlocks look new and strange. The stud in her forehead is also oddly unfamiliar, like a last-minute replacement that doesn't precisely match the rest of the picture. She's still smiling, and the smile's more controlled now, the smile of someone who's recently figured out something important. Or maybe just had good sex.

She speaks as though she's answering a question, but the question's never heard, no matter how many times the clip's played or how often it's re-edited.

'Yeah, I know I've upset people,' she says. 'But what *else* am I gonna do?'

She makes a gesture to the camera that might well be her version of a question mark. The interviewer doesn't respond, so Tiffany keeps talking.

'Just look at me,' she says. 'I mean, look at *all* of us. We've got answers worked out for everything, that's what the Executive's *for*. We might as well not be here, y'know?'

'But what you've said *is* going too far, surely?' asks the interviewer. (The channel's been trying to identify him, but to no avail. Thick, meaty, well-educated voice.)

'*Got* to go too far,' says Tiffany. 'Nowhere else to go.'

The interviewer pauses a moment, to take stock of this. 'You do know that in the last half hour, some of your fellow performers have made their feelings known?'

'They don't have feelings,' says Tiffany. 'They're not human.'

'You're saying that your contemporaries in the pop world—'

'They don't matter. They don't say anything. It doesn't matter.'

Ah, the sound of the man behind the camera shifting in his seat. Getting ready for the main thrust of his attack. 'So you think the answer to that… to pop stars who never say anything… is what you've done in the last few hours? To make deliberately outrageous, provocative statements, which could hurt a great many people?'

'No,' says Tiffany. '*That's* not my answer.'

'Then what is your solution?'

‘I think they should be killed,’ Tiffany explains.

4.38 Ouroborous

The music channels, the ones that show nothing but back-to-back video and don’t seem to have any presenters other than the adverts, are also responding to the situation. In the only way they can, given their complete lack of a “news” feature.

CTX is showing the “Hypnotised by You” video, although it’s always a popular filler choice, so it remains to be seen whether they’re trying to be topical, whether the crisis is reaching out through the media to affect their judgement or whether it’s simple coincidence. It’s the video that matches the last CD cover, with geisha-Tiffany writhing on her endless bed of blue silk. That’s during the verse, anyway: the slower, sensuous, soft-focus part. Then the snare drums roll into the chorus, the distort-guitar kicks in and…

…and Tiffany, still an eastern goddess but this time with golden bands around her neck and a sapphire third eye in the middle of her forehead, is standing in an oriental temple. She strikes a pose at the top of a set of Hollywood-wide stone steps, a flaming torch on either side of her, a crowd of dancer-worshippers going through their adulations at the bottom of the staircase. Behind her, framing her divine silhouette but otherwise little more than an incidental detail, an enormous gong-like disc is set into the wall. It bears her sigil, her holy sign for this one 3’22” exercise in idol-worship.

The symbol appears to be a snake, consuming its own tail. Any half-arsed alchemy student would recognise this as the Ouroborous, the endlessly-regenerating serpent which surrounds the world, suggesting life, renewal and (almost as an afterthought) immortality. But in Tiffany’s religion, the snake is twisted in the middle, so it becomes a figure-eight—the head of the snake forming a neat little knot at the centre. What’s more, the “corners” of this particular Ouroborous are angular rather than smooth, and the empty spaces between its coils become triangles instead of circles. Make of it what you will. Alchemy. The mathematical sign for “infinity.” An hourglass.

You could argue it says so much—infinite time, infinite life, infinite self-consumption (that last one’s particularly appropriate for a music video)—and all worked into the background, ideally-placed to work its way into the subconscious of any ritually-inclined individual who glimpses it. But you could also argue it bears a chilling resemblance to Tiffany’s record label logo, and therefore qualifies as in in-joke.

In the olden days, that symbol would have been found dead centre

of every LP the company produced, going round and round and round and round on the turntable, *really* giving the illusion of a creature devouring itself as well as scratching itself into the world's surface at a rate of thirty-three-and-a-third revolutions per minute. Not these days. These days it gets pressed into the plastic of every Tiffany Korta CD ever produced, and consumes itself up to nine times per second. Right inside the CD player, where nobody can see it.

4.39 The Last League

So there they all are, all together in the ambulance, lodged in the mud by the side of the road as the media builds its cordon sanitaire around the arena. Just the five of them. Inangela, Horror, Valentine, the dying girl and the bomb.

Technically, Inangela's sitting on Valentine, keeping his limbs pinned against the seat even though she's removed the knee from his chest. He looks almost peaceful, with his head against the door and his ribs calmly rising and falling under her weight. It can't have been easy, telling the whole truth like that. A may lead to B and B to C, but try explaining that to someone who wasn't there when it happened.

In the end it's Horror who breaks the silence. Horror, who's also been staring out of the windscreen, though presumably her thoughts are a lot less multi-layered.

'Right,' she says. 'Are we being chased by helicopters, or not?'

The other two (conscious) occupants of the ambulance have to mull this over for a few moments.

'They'll be here soon,' Valentine says. You'd be amazed how level his voice sounds, all things considered.

'They're after the bomb, then,' Horror concludes.

Valentine pauses. Then shrugs. As best he can, given his position.

Inangela shakes her head. 'More to it than that,' she says. 'There's got to be.'

Horror remains cynical. You can tell just by the pig-snort noise she makes.

'It's so *big*,' Inangela goes on. 'It's just… I can't believe it's all coincidence. Us. Ending up here. Tonight.'

Horror goes "tschtt." Inangela glares at her, and the glare's a pretty good one because Inangela's still wearing the mask.

'It's all the same thing,' she says.

'I don't understand,' says Valentine, from underneath her.

Inangela doesn't reply at once. Instead, she starts to shuffle. Slowly moving her weight off Valentine, until she's perched with one buttock on the edge of the driver's seat. Letting him have his limbs back.

'What are you doing?' asks Horror, with an obvious subtext of, "What the fuck are you doing?"

Slowly, Valentine starts to pull himself upright.

'You do know this is the kind of guy who builds nuclear bombs, yeah?' asks Horror.

'It's a *Ship*, Hor,' Inangela replies. 'We're talking about a real Ship.'

'What, and you want to help blow it up?'

'I don't *know*. I knew there was something under the ground. I just knew it. Maybe I was… maybe I was supposed to be helping to blow it up instead of waking it up. Look, it's not like I've got instructions, all right? It's not a coincidence. It *can't* be coincidence.'

'Bomb,' repeats Horror.

'Ship,' repeats Inangela.

Valentine looks from Inangela to Horror, from Horror to Inangela. Strange, isn't it? It's almost as though he needs their permission before he can carry on with this act of unspeakable terrorism.

'Ignore her,' Inangela tells him. 'Just drive.'

'Oh, fine,' mutters Horror, and looks down at her boots in disdain.

You see? Driving at immoral speeds; ingesting cocktails never before conceived by man or beast; getting involved in acts of ritual vandalism for no other reason than there's nothing better to do. All these things, Horror will do without hesitation. But going along with someone who's constructed his own nuclear device, piecemeal... for that you need to spend, ohh, at least forty seconds convincing her.

4.40 Androgyny

The odd thing is that nobody has actually said the word "missing." The star has simply "not commented." Nobody has even implied she may have disappeared off the face of the world, and yet…

Sightings. Hunts. The reporters aren't besieging her hotel or badgering her management, they're stalking the streets, literally in some cases. There's something about the curious interview footage, and all the subsequent reports, which hints she's fallen from more than just grace. This angel's feet now touch the pavement.

There's another sighting over in the west of the town, and violence is involved for the first time. Two men, coming off-shift in the early

hours and hearing about Evil Tiffany on the radio, saw the (quote) 'spitting image' of her not far from the factory complexes and decided to show her what happens to people who piss on the graves of the town's children. They chased her for three streets, caught her, and gave her a broken forearm before they realised it wasn't her at all.

What's interesting is that it wasn't even a girl. It was just an unusually bohemian young gentleman (possibly inspired by the "real" Tiffany Korta's retro-'70s look, but even so) with flared jeans and unfortunately fey blonde hair. Later press shots will show he bears no real resemblance to the pop icon at all, but then, he was wearing glasses when he was attacked. Which explains everything, apparently.

The factory-men who chased him seem curiously unapologetic, though they try not to look at the cameras eye-to-lens. The implication is that it serves the young bohemian right for dressing like the girl (not *a* girl, *the* girl). More generally, it also serves him right for walking past a factory complex looking like that.

Tiffany, deprived of flesh, has become genderless.

4.41 The Risks

Her image is once again seated in front of the blue silk, giving the impression this is part of the same recording which was released (the words "or escaped," often used jokingly by TV people, have never been more apt) at some unspecified time in the last few hours. Nonetheless, you could easily believe that it's been filmed in response to the events of the last few minutes. She's talking about the great celebrity-cull again.

'You don't think that's a bit harsh?' asks the interviewer, meaning, "you don't think that's utterly insane?"

Tiffany shrugs. 'No,' she says.

'Killing people for… what? Making pop records?'

'They're not people,' Tiffany says, before he's even finished. 'They're famous.'

A puzzled pause. 'But these *are* people you're talking about. They have families. Some of them have wives, children—'

'That's their problem.' Tiffany smiles when she says that. She looks very happy with herself all of a sudden. She doesn't say it, but she's just implied what half the viewers are already thinking. *They knew the risks*.

'But surely, these are just people doing a job?'

'Not a job,' says Tiffany, with the wisdom of one who's been there

and back again. ‘It’s the *world*.’

Is this really the way the Executive wrote it? Is this really part of their punishment, the great uber-form sabotage of their former protégé? Hard to believe that *any* Executive would deliberately strike nerves like these.

Evil Tiffany really *has* taken on a life of her own. And there’s an old ritualists’ saying about not summoning up what you can’t put down.

4.42 Up and Down

Patterns, patterns, patterns.

Look at any stretch of life, and you’ll see a length of small differences. Lay out the DNA of any animal, then lay out the DNA of its children, then lay out the DNA of its grandchildren, and you’ll see how it works. The tiny shifts in each iteration, much like the tiny movements that take place between one frame of videotape and the next (which makes you wonder what generations of DNA look like, if you run them together as a film). If it’s the culture-in-general you’re interested in—and who isn’t?—then the same principles apply, but the patterns are complex and the causal links uncertain. You know a child’s going to drop straight out of its mother, not manifest itself half a world away. Culture, like Tiffany Korta, is no longer limited by geography.

And see! All the reporters, gathering at the arena, making room for each other around the perimeter so none of their colleagues from rival stations are visible in shot. Seen from above you realise the spacing between them is almost perfect in its geometry, not because they’ve planned this but because they’re filling a kind of ecological niche. One or two cameras are moving, orbiting the arena perimeter at high speed, filming the filmers to illustrate a point about “media obsession” and believing this somehow puts them one step away from the horrific spectacle. You can hear the words of the reporters, as the moving cameras sweep around them:

‘…looks like the end of the road for *this* Rising Star.’

‘…looks like *this* Rising Star is about to start falling.’

‘…what’s almost certain is that *this* Rising Star has already started falling.’

‘…a lesson to the pop industry that even the brightest Rising Star can be dimmed with just a few badly chosen words.’

‘…timely reminder that what goes up, must come down.’

Four out of five of them use the “Rising Star” idea, actually not one

of Tiffany's more successful songs but it's too good a shot to miss. Three out of five intercut their reports with vox pops from whatever townsfolk they've been able to round up at this time of day, people encouraged to say that they whole-heartedly agree with the attacks on the record shops on pain of not getting on the news. Five out of five agree they're reporting on the end of a career, or at least a career so badly damaged that Ms. Korta's best option is to give up her dignity and turn herself into a kind of multi-media geek. ("Geek" in the fairground sense, that is, the performer who stands in a pit full of sawdust and bites the heads off live animals.) None out of the five, yet, have figured out what the *real* public response is going to be like.

4.43 Slaughter

The tape shows a live stage performance by a boy band. Let's not give the band a name, since nobody will ever remember it anyway, but there are five members and they fit all the demographic requirements (one black, one from an ethnic minority other than black, one with teenage stubble, and so on).

The venue is clearly a TV studio, made up to look like a hi-tech junkyard. Close-ups of the band members are intercut with CG graphics of the show's logo, the letters of the programme's name squashed together to make an animated but unspecified blue animal, spinning in time with the music. Or, more precisely, spinning in time with the dance routine.

Halfway through the second verse, Tiffany Korta walks into the stage. Her costume, rhythm and facial expression—head held high, independent post-feminist resolve rather than sultryness—are identical to those she displayed in the "In the Loop" video, which means she's the only thing here not moving to the beat. A halo of blue seems to insulate her body from the scene around her, even from the timestream of everything else in the studio. When she slows down it's like watching a videotape chewing itself up in the machine, until her body comes to a dead stop.

The dancing-band doesn't notice her. Not even when she pulls the gun, summoning it out of nowhere, so it seems to unfold itself from the seams of her clothing. Her arm is a blur as she raises it, not because she's fast but because it's somehow super-real, too intense to possess anything as dull as detail. The gun itself is a kind of black you usually only get in video games.

The crowd starts screaming, with voices which aren't its own. Tiffany pulls the trigger, over and over and over. One two three four five. Most of the carnage takes place off-screen, but there's a tell-tale

smear of blood across the camera lens and the *thump* of a body hitting the floor, as if this were a '30s radio drama. The footage ends at that point, replaced by a programme ID card of the "back shortly" variety. Evidently in shock, the blue animal has stopped dancing.

At least one news channel showed the tape before they figured out it wasn't real, which seems odd, because surely *someone* at the station must know what computer effects can do these days (conclusion: the technical staff don't like the news team, and will always try to get a laugh at the team's expense… but everyone knows that instinctively anyway). A second and far more reputable news channel is now claiming it *did* know the footage was faked, which is why its anchors only said 'we've just received this footage' and not 'Tiffany Korta has just shot and killed five people.' All the other stations have started using it as filler material, suggesting that although it's not real it still says something about the mood of the culture, but even in these post-Orson-Welles days you can't keep showing a clip like that on TV without *some* of the people getting the wrong idea.

Who made this amusingly bloodthirsty CGI forgery? Nobody knows. As usual, the newsreaders describe those responsible as somehow subversive, like computer fakers traditionally must be. Given the detail, it's likely it wasn't thrown together in the last half-hour or so. Somebody could have had this strange little snuff-fantasy on their hard drive for weeks, but until now you never would have seen it on the news. After all, for some time now there's been a game available on the internet that requires the player to steer Tiffany's head into the middle of a set of rifle-sights and put a virtual bullet in her skull. They call it "Slaughter Korta."

But harder to explain are the other snuff-animations that now start pouring in to the world's media outlets. Some of them are pathetically shoddy, many involving lookalikes who don't look-anything-like, but others are oddly disturbing. One of them, cut with the precision of a Hollywood action movie and cleverly splicing specially-shot material with computer-aided TV footage, shows Tiffany straddling and brutally strangling Waco Black: the grunting, choking noises plastered over the soundtrack give it a decidedly sexual edge. There's another video, of Tiffany driving a knife into the chest of a well-known journalist and media pundit, which seems to involve no stock footage at all and verges on the incomprehensible.

Were all these fantasies made beforehand? Have they all just been waiting to be released? If the uber-form of Tiffany Korta is indeed going through a massive metamorphosis, then there's something very Jekyll-and-Hyde about all of this. The fragments of Evil Tiffany are being drawn out from their dark, subconscious niches all across the

world, coming out into the light of the dawn and converging on the arena.

4.44 Transmission

'*Pop stars aren't exactly known for their tact, but you'd have to go a long way to find one who caused such a stir for all the wrong reasons…*'

She's not the best-looking reporter the channel has, but she's here in the textbook right place at the textbook right time and that's enough. She looks as though she *should* be presenting a story about the fall of a younger, prettier star. With her '80s hair and that tight-business-suit look, she's become a semi-ironic sex symbol in these territories, the woman that men think about when they want to think about someone less than perfect.

So when she appears on the station's pre-breakfast bulletin, standing at the gates of an arena flanked by "Tiffany Unleashed" posters on either side, you've got to acknowledge this is how wars *should* be fought—between one celebrity and another. Because as she reveals Tiffany Korta's crimes to the waking world, there's no doubt that she is *not* impartial. She has to stand under an umbrella to make the report, and the raincoat's less than flattering, but Jesus she looks happy here.

You can see the masses gathering behind her, other reporters also launching this early salvo against the missing Ms. Korta. And if you look hard enough you can even see an ambulance passing through the gate. Blue lamp flashing. It's not clear why anyone needs an ambulance, but it gives a suitably lethal feel to events.

What's interesting is that this on-the-spot report isn't initially shown on her own station. Flecked with static and flickering in and out of monochrome, it's first broadcast on a rival cable channel, several minutes before it's meant to be transmitted. This is apparently due to some kind of technical problem rather than multi-media hi-jacking, and technicians at the scene have already noticed their transmissions aren't always ending up where they're supposed to, the implication being there's some kind of local anomaly sucking their work into the ground and pumping it out across the land in whatever way it chooses.

You'd be forgiven for thinking the news about Tiffany, such as it is, just can't help leaking out.

4.45 Give Me One Good Reason

Valentine in the driver's seat, Inangela in the passenger seat, Horror back in the rear with the corpse-girl and the bomb. The bomb doesn't bother Horror, which is to say, it doesn't bother her any more than a fly on the windscreen or one potato-eye too many in a bag of chips. She scowls at it occasionally. She lets it know who's boss. Thankfully, she doesn't do anything else that might annoy it.

More of the reporters move aside for the ambulance as it rolls towards the arena entrance. Barely any of them give it a second glance.

'These people you're working for,' Inangela says, while she glares at anybody who does give her a second glance. 'The ones you think are from Faction Paradox.'

'I wasn't supposed to work *for* them,' Valentine protests, not taking his eyes of the mud-path ahead. 'I'm not… you know.'

'A terrorist?' Horror suggests.

'What I'm saying,' Inangela cuts in, before Valentine can realise he doesn't know how to answer. 'What I'm saying, is this. You didn't think it was sort of… weird?'

Valentine looks puzzled.

'Faction Paradox,' Inangela elaborates. 'A *real* Faction Paradox. Who know people who… hang around in pubs.'

'Erm, no,' says Valentine.

'You never thought that maybe they were… lying to you?'

Valentine grits his teeth. Clearly, it's occurred to him.

'I used to belong to this group,' he says. 'This… kind of… revolutionary group. I thought it was revolutionary. When I was seventeen.'

'Everything is, when you're seventeen,' says Inangela the great wit and prophet.

'Yeah. What I mean is… it was meant to be this, this political party, you know? Supposed to be high-powered, lots of contacts, lots of ground support. The agenda looked great. You should have seen the pamphlet. Health reform. Really big on education. Lots of stuff about helping the sick and the elderly. Everything.'

'Go on then,' says Inangela. 'What's the punchline?'

'Turned out to be a front organisation. Recruiting for the Neo-Nazis.'

'What?'

Valentine gives her a "don't ask me" gesture, but only takes one

hand off the wheel to do it. ‘That’s what Neo-Nazis believe in. Education. Health reform. Just as long as you don’t look like you’re gay or foreign or… I don’t know… human.’

‘Mmm-hmm,’ says Inangela. ‘And this is to do with Faction Paradox because…?’

‘Because almost every underground group you come across is trying to sell you something. Happened to other people I know, as well. They signed up as radicals and it turned out they were working for Christians or mind-control cults or something.’

‘Where not covered by the above.’

‘Uhh. But *these* people. The Faction. I was talking to them for months, before I got to talk to the, ahh… the inner circle. Told them everything I thought. Everything I wanted to do. They agreed with most of it. Never turned out to have any kind of… any kind of agenda they were trying to stick on me. Apart from the one they started out with, anyway.’

‘Until they got you to build a bomb,’ Inangela points out.

‘Maybe that’s what I wanted,’ Valentine tells her, but you can judge for yourselves whether he’s being ironic.

4.46 Eighth Sense

Somehow, the latter portions of the interview have moved from the larger news stations to the smaller ones without being caught up in the legal process. It’s like a fat man shouting into a canyon. This is just the echo of the last few words.

‘Aren’t you taking all of this a bit seriously?’ the (still-unknown) interviewer asks the image of Tiffany. ‘At the end of the day, these people are just entertainers, aren’t they? A lot of people like what they do, they have a right to make a living by—’

‘D’you know how *big* they are?’ Tiffany cuts in.

Obviously he’s not ready for that. ‘I’m sorry, do I know…?’

‘I know how big they are,’ Tiffany tells him. ‘I know how big *I* am. Y’know? It’s not like… it’s not like it doesn’t matter any more. It’s too big now. Really.’

‘So you think *all* pop stars should be killed?’

‘No.’

‘Then—’

‘Only if they’re better that way.’

That's it, the world decides, she's on drugs. This doesn't stop anyone watching, though. 'And… how do you judge?' the interviewer asks.

'Can't you tell?' says Tiffany. 'Just, like… by instinct?'

4.47 Before Transmission

Three of the monitors in the OB van are operational, all of them supposedly receiving signals from the cameramen outside, mixing the signals here in a safe little electrical environment while the rain attacks any technicians or anchorpersons stupid enough to go outside. There are, however, problems. Every crew gathered around the arena has noticed the interference, or *claims* to have noticed, but there's a sneaking suspicion that one single crew is getting a perfect picture and jamming everybody else on purpose. Among the most technically-minded technicians (those who hold discussions with their own kind in their own language, regardless of the station), the prevailing theory is that the presence of so many cameras in one place is somehow producing a kind of god-static, a good theory because it impresses the rest of the crews even though it's not possible.

Right now one of the reporters is standing at the back of the van, peering in from the rain, watching two of the technician-gnomes fiddling with the controls and discussing how the controls should be fiddled with in future. She doesn't understand what she's seeing on the monitors. Apart from the fact that all the pictures are washed out, blue-tinted and marked with static, only two of them seem to represent what's actually happening outside. The third monitor's showing nothing but sizzling, hazy-edged blue, so it takes the reporter a moment or two to make any sense of it at all. An explosion? A mushroom cloud? Well, an explosion anyway. And the picture's shaking, as if the cameraman's not sure whether to keep filming, run, or reach a compromise and run in reverse. If there is a cameraman, and this isn't just a technical glitch. Blue feedback.

'What's happening?' she asks the techies.

They look at each other, and gesture in a 'You?' 'No, you' kind of way, before one of her tells her.

'Cock-up,' he says.

'We're getting signals from somewhere else,' the other elaborates, since the ball's been passed to him. 'We've got one and two working, but three's still out. Could be some kind of local satellite set-up, something like that.'

'We were getting *The Twilight Zone* a minute ago,' the first techie points out.

The reporter nods towards monitor number three. ‘And what’s that supposed to be?’

Both gnomes turn to look, as if they’ve never seen the blue mushroom before. ‘Dunno,’ one of them (it hardly matters which) tells her. ‘Something on cable…?’

‘Unless this is a special *Twilight Zone* monitor,’ the other mumbles, through his beard. ‘And we’re getting TV programmes from the past.’

‘Woooh,’ the other adds.

‘Fine,’ says the reporter, not wanting to get drawn any further into the gnome-world. With that she turns away from the OB van, tries to keep her posture as she struts through the mud, and prepares to make her first broadcast from the scene using one of the cameras that does work. As it happens, Camera Two is already waiting for her. She positions herself in front of the arena gate, fixes her ‘80s hair under the cover of the trademark company umbrella and takes the mike.

An ambulance passes through the gate just as the video starts rolling, which gives a suitably lethal feel to events.

‘Pop stars aren’t exactly known for their tact…’ she begins.

4.48 The Wrath of Ages

One of the local channels is now showing a group of surly-looking men and bitter-faced old women, standing on the wet pavement outside the broken and now-burning window of the megastore, determined to stand around and look hostile despite the weather blattering at their coats. In combination with the snide voice-over, the implication is that these people represent something like a lynchmob, a group of angry locals waiting for Tiffany to show herself so they can tear her into relic-sized pieces.

But if so, why do they think she’ll manifest herself here? Now that the cardboard cut-out of her has been set alight in the shop window, do they think the definite article will appear to them out of the smoke and flames? Is this even a lynchmob at all, or just a group of bland, miserable people who happened to be around when the fire started?

The media’s really pushing the point home here. Evil Tiffany is, indeed, evil. It’s shocking and disgraceful that she should overtly threaten other members of her profession (the dead fourteen-year-old has become a secondary issue now, despite the focus on the lynchmob, as if these people congregated here because they’re worried that Tiffany’s jeopardised the safety of Kirsten from Girl Party). To an extent, they *have* to make sure everyone understands she’s the villain.

To an extent, she's one of their own kind, and their disgust has to be made clear in case anyone thinks she's speaking for them all.

It's not clear, however, whether the public's in total agreement here. The reporters are just assuming. They haven't heard the echo. When Tiffany's 'they should all be killed' speech was first broadcast, they didn't listen carefully enough to hear the millions of careless, gut-driven voices—of those still up after all-nighters, or those in different time-zones—who said: 'Yeah, I wouldn't mind killing…'

…though there were many ways of finishing that sentence. Some of them ended it with 'you,' since Tiffany's not what you'd call universally popular, while others went for Boy Band Singer A or Girl Band Singer B or… you get the idea. The reporters are assuming that the celebrities, who share their own flesh and blood, are *loved*.

There are things they've forgotten. They've forgotten that for every human being who worships a starlet, two who loathe her beyond measure. They've forgotten about the confused, resentful feeling which exists in every society in the modern world, the anger of a population raised to believe that hard-work-equals-success and then shown a whole parade of blank-eyed, genetically-pleasing young people given endless sex, endless drugs and endless money for no decent moral reason. More profound than greed or jealousy, though, they've forgotten what these icons and idols and angels and daemons *do*. That they have a certain power, an influence over the thoughts and expectations of the world which has no real parallel in history. They've forgotten, if they ever understood it, that with power and influence come responsibility.

Oh, to Hell with it, let's make it explicit. They've forgotten things buried a long, long way down in the human psyche, things that only anthropologists and historians like to talk about. They've forgotten that when you make a God-King, you have to ritually burn him alive once his reign's over. It's a way of making sure that only people who care about the culture more than their own interests take the job, and it's a good fertility sacrifice, too.

There's a kind of rock-star mythology that expects every band to practice Satanism and fetishism and ritualism behind the scenes, to meddle in the casually evil, to defile and sacrifice and cannibalise its fans. None of this is true. The stars are too bland, too carefully-contrived to become true monsters.

But the audience… now, the audience is dangerous. Beyond this town, with its own parochial concerns about its own parochial children, the audience isn't going to sympathise with Tiffany's "victims" any more than it sympathises with Tiffany herself. They

knew what they were getting into.

All those careless, careless people, joking about the celebrities they'd like to kill, or punch in the face at the very least. This culture has been feeding on their anxieties, their weaknesses and their sexual vulnerability for years. They have a profound and terrible *hatred*, and before now it's never been tapped.

4.49 Boom

The collision-battered ambulance that's now heading into the arena, leaving a trail of mud in its wake as it rolls down the dirt-slope and onto the crater floor, has no reservations about staying in the wings.

The crater has become the crucible it always wanted to be. If it looked *King Kong* before, then now the illusion's complete—if it is just an illusion. The reporters, the cameramen, the lighting technicians and the sound crews are here on the inside of the arena as well as the outside, all of them having chosen this one desolate, litter-blown patch of ground to represent Tiffany Korta's fall, all of them sticking to the crater's edges. They may just want to stay close to the barriers, or they may realise the grand expanse of dirt and dust in front of them is a stage, and that it's not their place to venture out onto it. Either way, from the centre of the arena they look positively tribal. Little packs of Kong-worshippers, waving their lights, booms and other tiny fetishes.

The reporters note the ambulance's presence, and appreciate its value as "background colour," but as yet don't see anything strange about the fact that it's heading right for the centre of the world. The ambulance slows, and slows, and slows, and rolls to a stop in the middle of the arena. There's a pause; then it starts again; staggers a few feet forwards; and comes to a complete halt.

The driver's obviously trying to park at the exact dead centre of the crater. This arouses the attention of some of the media types, at least. There's something terribly circus-like about this, although contrary to expectations the doors of the ambulance don't fly off, the bonnet doesn't pop open and no clowns emerge to check out the damage. What a pity. The audience was hoping something would explode.

4.50 Cover Me

The engine stops purring. The windscreen-wipers stop moving. The rain immediately seizes its chance and starts to spread over the glass. The lights of the television crews bulge and stretch as the water

distorts them, and it's hardly reassuring.

There's silence in the ambulance, except for the rain-tattoo from outside. They all knew there'd be silence at this point, didn't they? It's not as if any of them can say, 'Right then, let's go to work.' Valentine and Inangela keep gazing straight ahead, through the blotchy windscreen, and once more it's Horror who speaks first.

'They're all looking at us,' she says.

Horror doesn't like being looked at. Inangela's starting to learn this about her. Actually it's not clear how Horror *knows* the people gathered around the lip of the crater are looking at them, since she's staring at the girl on the stretcher and isn't anywhere near a window. Peculiar: everybody knows about "the feeling of being watched," but nobody ever stops to consider that it might explain why TV stars have so many nervous breakdowns.

'I can't use the bomb now,' says Valentine. 'I can't. There's all these… *people*. There weren't supposed to be people.'

'They're not people,' Horror tells him. 'They're TV people.'

'Everything's led us here,' says Inangela. 'Everything. We keep coming back here. I keep coming back here, anyway. It's like something's reaching out under the ground and… you know. This is like our crucible.'

'Our what?' says Horror.

But now Valentine's giving Inangela a *look*, like she's said something that nearly makes sense to him, that's reminded him of something he never finished working out. Inangela doesn't know exactly what he needs to hear, so she just shrugs.

'I'm getting out,' she says.

She reaches for the handle of the door, tugs it open, and immediately lets the first vanguard of the rain blow into the driver's section. As she launches herself towards the outside world, she sees Valentine scoop something up from the floor of the driver's section, but she doesn't see exactly what. It looks a lot like a thermos flask.

4.51 Number One with a Bullet

Once again, there was never any chance of Waco Black letting himself be outdone. Though his video appearances have frequently featured his own unpleasantly pale and skeletal body being crucified, flagellated and devoured by sexually desirable female vampires, the idea of threatening the lives of *other* pop stars never struck him as being viable. Perhaps he, or his management, felt it'd cut a little too

close to home. But when Tiffany raised the stakes, he didn't have much option but to match her.

'Yeah, I heard what she said,' he told the first reporters who caught up with him. He made it sound as if he'd been saying it for years. 'I mean, ****, yeah, everyone knows it's true. Some of those ****ers deserve to die, right?'

There was another flurry of questions after that. He ignored the one reporter who asked him 'like who?,' because he honestly didn't know how to answer. His fans may have been the "alternative" people, but these days "alternative" is the larval stage of the teenage pupal-form which starts out as "boy band fan," so he knew even then that mentioning any other act by name was a bad move. Once he was sure he'd matched Tiffany evil-point-for-evil-point, he turned his back on the reporters with his trademark (*literally* trademark) satanic grin, revealing—as ever—fake incisors filed to points.

That was four minutes ago. The whole strategy has now backfired, however, as someone has just shot him through the head.

4.52 Yes: The Crucible

Like being surrounded.

What do I mean, "like"? We *are* surrounded.

Inangela imagines the TV people charging forward. All of them wearing different badges and holding umbrellas of different company colours, but united in their effort to hack apart the infidels who've trodden on their holy ground. Zulu media.

Valentine and Horror are with her now, keeping close to the parked ambulance, giving nervous, hurried glances to the army around them. Inangela ignores them, and tracks the curve of the crater, the slope of wet dirt that marks the edge of this Pit at the centre of the Pit. This place where she nearly starved herself to death, for whatever stupid ritual reasons she may have had.

No. Can't have been stupid. Everything's been too perfect. The ritual meant something, didn't it? And if it didn't then it bloody well should have done. Admittedly the plan to finish the unicursal pentagram seems to be briefly derailed, but… for God's sake, she's just left a hi-jacked ambulance with what appears to be a nuclear device assembled under orders from Faction Paradox. Of course this means something.

This is the crucible. The ring of lights and cameras and microphones have turned this into a very specific point in *culture*. This is what Inangela caught a glimpse of before, when she was here in the dirt on

a colder night than this, starved to the point of incomprehensibility. Not just something buried under the earth, but something large enough to have its own sense of context.

Inangela keeps turning, finding every tiny detail suddenly familiar. The little human shapes might *seem* to be randomly arranged around the crater, but there are patterns she feels she knows, if only because she's glimpsed them before. Is that it? Is she hooked into time, somehow? Is it something to do with the Ship? (She considers trying to share this thought with the others, but then imagines Horror saying: 'Or it might just remind you of something you've seen on TV.')

And the huge, dark thing that's shifting its weight inside Inangela stirs, and for a moment she can see its surface, black and shiny and gorgeous. Something she's seen on TV, something from the future, something that was either woken up by the ritual or that devised the ritual itself as a kind of alarm-call. Language, understanding and precognition. The Ship, the culture-in-general and the Great Urban Horror. There's only one process. There's only one process, but that's a kind of knowledge so heavy and profound that you'd need to see all of humanity at once to take it in.

All of humanity. War. Culture. Ritual.

'Wait—' she says.

But the army stationed around the crater is already stirring, the lights bobbing, the heads of the TV people turning, hearing the sound even before Inangela does. Coming over the barrier and into the arena, grinding up the air as it goes.

Chud-chud-chud-chud-chud…

4.53 Pact (1)

More videotape footage. This is the big one, though, the tape that every TV station in the world would like to have at its disposal. It's shot with a single camera, on good old-fashioned black-and-blue surveillance video, and the only copy currently in existence resides in the archives of the Executive. Whether those archives literally exist as a physical space is up to the individual to decide.

The tape is a witness, a replacement for the more old-fashioned human witness who's duty-bound to stand by at the signing of any important agreement. We can see a room in near-darkness, a bare lightbulb hanging over the pale blue faces of the two figures at the centre of the scene. The camera sees all this from a raised angle, looking down on the Chief Executive's huge antlered skull and on the straight, blue-blonde hair of Tiffany Kortez, caught mere moments

before losing her birth-name. (In fact, the Chief Executive is a different individual to the one Tiffany faced in the arena, an hour ago from our POV and two years in the future from the tape's. The mask is the same, but the voice is different, so there's the same uneasiness you get whenever a TV series replaces one actor with a roughly similar one.)

Tiffany is kneeling. The Chief Executive extends a hand, as if he's thinking of patting her head or stroking her hair. Between them is a small table, and if Tiffany weren't bowed then she'd be at eye-level with the document which rests on its surface. A single piece of blue paper, the writing invisible from this height.

'…understand the consequences?' the Chief Executive intones, with a slight rasp in his voice that wasn't part of the other one's repertoire.

Tiffany nods, sheepishly, without looking up. She has none of the brashness that we, and the world, are used to seeing. It's possible she's been drugged. If so then this could be the come-down from her very first coke ingestion.

'You will be everywhere,' the Chief Executive tells her. 'On every second magazine cover. On every third television channel. In the thoughts of every fourth human being in the civilised world. You will have no privacy. Even if you attempt to hide your body, some part of yourself will always be seen. Is that clear to you?'

Again, she nods. Three times fast. Later on, the Executive will decide to enhance and develop this gesture.

'They will love you and attempt to destroy you,' the Chief Executive continues. 'This is the price you will pay for their attention. For that ability to influence them and speak to them. You will have a power over your generation that no statesman will be able to match. You must tell us that you understand this. Before you sign the contract, you must assure us that you have understood the ramifications.'

And again, she nods. Even from this angle we can tell she's lying, but obviously the Executive isn't going to care. This is just formal procedure. If its new charge doesn't really understand at all then, well, it just makes the job easier. Poor Tiffany. She probably doesn't even know what a "ramification" is.

Poor Tiffany. Poor little girl, who's about to become hopelessly wealthy, who's about to become known and worshipped in every important state on this side of the world, who's about to have every excess catered for, who's about to have everything she needs, wants or even thinks about handed to her by her new Executive. Ahhhhhhhhh. Don't you just feel sorry for her?

4.54 Nervousness

So far there's only been one rocket attack this evening, the one which got the night off to such a flying start. Since attacks almost always occur between the hours of eleven and three, nobody is expecting any more tonight, and in the centre of town the usual (slight) War anxiety has faded. If there's going to be any violence, it'll be something to do with the lynchmobs and/ or rampaging psychotic celebrities.

It comes as a surprise, then, when the sky abruptly bursts open somewhere in the part of town which Inangela has described as the "southern" slice of the five-part town pie. Many people see the flash in the distance, but the exact target of the rocket strike remains unspecified. Moments later, it happens again. An identical flash, an identical sense of disorientation among those who witness it, but in the west this time. It instantly causes more consternation than most, since by now the sky is blue-grey rather than black, and anyone would have expected a great, dark, shark-like Ship of War visible in the vicinity. A terror attack is the only feasible explanation, as—unlike rocket attacks—terror attacks are notoriously underhand and subterranean. They have been ever since the Gunpowder Plot.

However, even once the shock's worn off there's still something deeply off-centre about these particular attacks. Perhaps it's the subtle tang of conspiracy, of a terrible masterplan in the making. Tiffany Korta is shooting the famous, real or otherwise, on the news. Civil disturbances are already starting to criss-cross the town. Now this, as if the War-time powers have decided to cauterise parts of the wounded community. The first attack is rumoured to have been just off Brookland Street, the neighbourhood where that teenager was killed. Not close enough to be conclusive, but still.

The sun prepares to rise as the *Sun* prepares to go to press. The early-risers look out of their windows or watch the local bulletins, waiting to see where the next attack will hit, secretly hoping it'll be close enough to witness but not close enough to burn them.

4.55 Valentine in the Spotlight

At this time of day, the sky's light enough to let you see things moving in the clouds but too dark to give them any definition. The rain doesn't help. The three black silhouettes, coming into view over the wall of the arena, are nothing but patches in the air. They become impossible, legendary things, every myth of Black Helicopters and

Great Birds of Death given fuzzy-edged form.

Three silhouettes. One in the lead, the other two respectfully keeping their distance. Three columns of light, burning the ground wherever they pass. As the leader advances over the barrier, the spotlight in its stomach touches the arena for the first time, briefly sweeping over the gate and the Tiffany Korta posters plastered over the official merchandising stalls. Reporters and camerafolk, momentarily caught by the beam, blink in the glare and then look up anyway. They have no option. The behemoth in the sky has no interest in them, though, and seconds later the circle of light is passing over the litter on the crater floor instead.

Coming this way. Inevitably.

Do they want the bomb? Valentine isn't sure. But there's no point running now. He's not so much rooted to the spot as physically stuck to it, shoes sinking into a layer of dirt that's rapidly turning into swamp, making him wonder if the Ship underneath him is dragging him down into itself. The wind from the sky-creatures blows the rain into Valentine's face with a force almost military. Next to him, the girl who has no name other than Horror takes one squishy, involuntary step towards him, and one fat tit rubs against the side of his arm. He can feel the shape of two ring-like piercings, even through his damp, rain-dirty clothes.

Valentine's feet sink further into the ground, up to the ankles, up to the shins. The weight of the world is, as ever, dragging him down.

4.56 Inangela in the Spotlight

The column of light seems wider than it did, even given that it's closer now. The blue spreads out in front of Inangela, until there's nothing but the brilliant glare and the two tiny, human figures in front of it. Valentine and Horror, as shadow-puppets. One frozen stiff, the other shuffling her feet in the mud, looking truly anxious for what may be the first time in her existence.

The column of light—the wall of light, by now—reaches the ambulance. At this range the light's too bright to make out anything in the blue, which is presumably why there's now only one silhouette in front of her.

Horror's taking a messy, nervous step backwards and trying to get a good look at the thing in the sky. Then she, too, is gone. In the last split-second before the beam passes over her, the light eats away at her outline, slicing away at her surplus flesh and leaving a smaller, scrawnier shape printed on Inangela's eyes. In that one moment,

Horror becomes almost bestial. Her head shrinks and takes on a snout. Her limbs become as awkward as a cartoon character's. Wile E. Coyote limbs. Then even that image gets burned away.

Inangela herself simply looks up. Moments later she can't see a single thing, partly because of the light as it falls on top of her, partly because of the rain in her eyes. She sees pure white, then the blue spots of the blood-cells in the back of her skull, then colours beyond the spectrum.

It's the ritual. This is what she's been programming herself for, these last few weeks, and probably (if accidentally) for a long time before that. Conditioning herself to see things the way they should be seen, conditioning herself through signs and symbols and domesticated poisons. The big, dark, glorious thing at the back of her skull lurches forward, bringing with it memories of car rides and urban picnics and pop videos and near-starvation and breadcrumb-coated visions.

The light takes Inangela. The dark moves out of her head. In that moment, she knows the Ship/ Culture/ Horror and the Ship/ Culture/ Horror knows her.

Then the ground snatches her out of the light, before the light can disintegrate her completely, and suddenly she's somewhere else.

4.57 The War

Look! Just for this one moment, they can see the War. The War in its entirety, War beyond its human meaning, beyond little considerations like death-tolls and weapons-production facilities large enough to support global economies. They can see why and how it exists, and (for just a *moment*, remember) even the nature of the sides fighting it. Beyond the media and the propaganda, they become the first human beings to understand all the facts, and judge the War on its own terms.

Is it really necessary, this conflict? Does it look necessary, to these super-aware witnesses? Remember, "necessary" is a loaded word. Wars are supposed to be necessary because there's Them and there's Us, and if you're not with Us then you're with Them, and the country of Them will always be a threat to the country of Us. Then again—and this was always Valentine's view, at least until this very moment—you'd have to admit that the leaders of the country of Them and the leaders of the country Us are virtually identical. All of them abuse the people they rule; every single one of them hoards power for himself and his friends; however civilised the leader of Us says he is, you know he'd outlaw all opposition and rule his nation like an evil god *if*

he thought he could get away with it. In Valentine's world that's Them, the eternal uber-class. The Us? The Us are those who burn in the crossfire—the men, women and children who get bombed into dirt and to hell with what country they come from. They're all Us.

Inangela's view is subtly different. In Inangela's world, everybody's Them, with a few key exceptions. In Inangela's world the warleaders and the victims, those who make the rules and those who follow the rules, those who get rich by turning their people into soap and those who spend most of their lives forgetting the television programmes they watched more than half an hour ago, are all part of one vast and hopeless mass. The Us are the exceptions, although what makes them exceptions (in her scheme of things, anyway) is hard to define. Presumably the Us are just the people who take an interest. Like Faction Paradox, in whichever of its forms you choose, what matters isn't what they do or say or are: It's the fact that they *can* do or *can* say or *can* be. It's not something she'd try to put into words, although if you wanted to sum up her philosophy in one phrase then it'd go like this:

The only difference between Them and Us is that we know we're Us.

Before now, Tiffany Korta never had any real thoughts about Them and Us at all. But since she never argued a single contentious point in her whole career, and was happy to support anything that War or government might inflict on the world simply by smiling through it all, what's interesting is that both Valentine and Inangela would have classified her as one of Them.

4.58 Pact (2)

Back to *that* recording, the darkened room captured on simple black-and-blue video. The top of Tiffany's head, bobbing a little as she scans the contract on the table in front of her, a token gesture to prove she's not completely stupid even though she's already made her decision. She's not kneeling any more. This has suddenly become a business transaction, and anyway, Tiffany Korta—unlike Tiffany Kortez—can't be seen to kneel before anyone.

She picks up the pen. She moves to sign the bottom of that single sheet of paper. A mere slip of a contract, compared to some. In the same way that Tiffany is about to extend far beyond the skinny little girl we see here, it's feasible the contract has most of its meaning-mass elsewhere, that by signing, she's agreeing to bargains which can't be expressed in ink.

The pen touches the surface.

‘They may try to kill you,’ says the Chief Executive. His voice goes up at the end of the sentence, making him sound like the ideal worldly-wise father figure.

The pen freezes. Tiffany looks up at him. Wide-eyed as ever.

‘It has been known,’ he goes on. ‘Obsessives. Lunatics. It’s rare, I’m sure you know that. But it happens. More than one… *individual* in your position… has been assassinated.’

Tiffany doesn’t know what to say. She looks down at the paper again. You can tell she’s desperate to sign. Is she going over things in her head, or just pretending so she doesn’t look reckless? She may be remembering her big Catholic family, wondering how they’d feel about her having to go everywhere with bodyguards in case someone wants to take the “Killing of the God-King” ritual a little too seriously.

‘But you should be above all of that,’ the Chief Executive concludes.

It’s a carefully-chosen phrase, and we know Tiffany’s going to sign even as she gazing at the contract. It’s fair to assume the Chief Executive is testing her. Look at the way she’s pretend-pondering, the way she’s thinking it over. This is someone who’s already wondering, though she’d never admit it to herself or her family, how spectacular her death would be. How many people would cry all over the world, and how many hundreds/ thousands/ millions would come to her funeral. And how long her record would stay at number one, and how melancholy and wonderful her songs would seem in retrospect, and how she’d be remembered for years and years and years afterwards. No, forget about years. Make it forever.

What the Chief Executive can see, and what even we can see on this pale, crackling videotape (admittedly with hindsight), is that this is a girl who’s already starting to think about her uber-self first and her body second. She hesitates, so we know the Executive has a lot of work ahead in using her in its campaign to completely master the popular media. She hesitates, but… she signs anyway.

The recording ends. The tape’s done its job as a witness, and whatever metaphorical screen we’re watching fills up with static, white noise in blue. So many little light-and-dark pixels, all crawling over each other like bugs.

4.59 The South-West Edge of Town

They’re heading home from an all-night party, which makes them pretty much the last of their kind. In half an hour there’ll be enough light in these streets to let you navigate without headlights, and at that point the town will belong to people starting the day-shift, not

the last survivors of the Night Before. Not that any of these three retiring partygoers (all male) have cars, or would be capable of driving in this state anyway. In theory they're heading along one of the streets at the very, very edge of town, where one community starts to bleed into the next, but in their current state distance seems a relative and pointless thing. Every item on the way home, every street-sign and every piece of litter in the gutter, becomes a source of amusement. In this magical, timeless world they've suddenly discovered, empty Coke cans become footballs, signposts become complicated linguistic challenges and words like "plunge" or "alley" or "cock" become hilariously funny.

And they've just found a speed camera, hooked to a lamp-post halfway along the street. The challenge it presents is obvious: The three of them have to see whether they can run past it fast enough to set it off. They're assuming they'll be able to hear the "click" if they succeed, but so far their efforts have only resulted in one of them falling into the road and two of them laughing very hard. Finally one of them suggests the camera might be triggered if he gets up close and moves his *hand* fast, fooling it into thinking his knuckles are a large vehicle. All agree that this is a good idea, even though it requires him to stand on one of his colleague's shoulders.

When this wise man of the three eventually finds himself face-to-face with the camera, with his friend wobbling beneath him and grasping his ankles like there's no today, he finds that the *really* hard part is making his hand go fast enough. He tries waving his fingers across the camera lens, but it doesn't work. He tries moving his fingers in a zig-zag, but that doesn't work either. Finally he tries drawing a rough shape in mid-air, a complicated figure-eight, almost certainly inspired by something he saw on MTV or on the wall of a public toilet or something. Wasn't the TV on at the party, tuned to some music request channel or other? Probably.

The figure-eight does the trick, which is to say, he's sure he hears *something* move inside the camera. He shouts 'okay' down to his friend, and his friend interprets 'okay' to mean 'drop me on my face.'

The beast is already waking up. The ritual is its own process, and by now it goes beyond any one person. Too much of its body is already visible on the surface. If nobody's there to complete the pentagram, it'll find a way to finish the procedure. It doesn't need anybody to have intent—it just needs probability. Put the same idea into enough heads and the desired pattern will eventually emerge. At first it looks like coincidence, but then the process gets bigger and the chances of it reaching its ascension go from one in a million to one in a hundred-thousand, from one in a hundred-thousand to one in ten-thousand,

until eventually there's just *one*.

The pentagram around the town, with four of its five points connected, marks out the boundary of its existence. Its existence in the here and now, that is, in this particular place on this all-important day. The more people see that pattern, the more they're drawn into it. Soon everyone's going to notice it, and they won't be able to think of anything else. Then it'll be free.

Unbound.

Fully defined.

5. Morning

5.00 History Revealed

This is how it works, as far as Inangela's concerned.

A scientist points a device of death (let's call it a laser-gun) at a victim and fires. He knows every atom in the path of the beam will be incinerated, the target's skin will boil and burn away but those parts of the body left outside the beam will remain intact, and anything which happened to be *around* the victim will also suffer. Much of the floor is bound to be singed, not to mention the walls.

On the other hand, a magician points a device of death (let's call it a wand) and fires. She knows that the victim will vanish or turn to ash in his entirety, leaving everything around him intact, maybe even his clothes. That's the difference, you see. That's the real difference. Magic is the art of meanings. The universe doesn't know where a human being ends and the clothes begin. The laws of physics only know atoms, not complete shapes. Only a magician's weapon recognises the target as a target, and only magic understands context. Magic *is* context.

Although Inangela would, naturally, never be so vulgar as to use words like "magic."

And time? Funny, really. We think about changing history, and we think about theoretical worlds where the wrong side won the Battle of A or the wrong politician became the President of B. Because these things have meaning to us, that's all. We think to ourselves, "If this great man of the past is assassinated then the war he fought will be lost, history will be changed and the whole fabric of space-time could be torn apart," as if the fabric of space-time would understand the concept of "great man" or "war" or even "history." As if the universe would notice the actions of these brief, tiny patches of life. As if the laws which govern that universe would care even if you changed the position of every atom in every object in every world that ever existed.

5.01 Faction Paradox Revealed

What would *really* happen if you tried to change history? What would happen if you travelled back to the day when (say) a man set off a nuclear bomb, and tried to stop it? A paradox? An alternative timeline? It seems arrogant, to think that something as grandiose as a

new timeline would be created just for the benefit of the few billion human beings who might be affected. Did it occur to you that *nothing* might happen?

Maybe if someone stopped Valentine detonating the bomb, it'd go off anyway. Why not? Subatomic particles appear out of nowhere all the time, for no good reason at all. The world only looks causal to us because we look at its meanings, not its little pieces. Because we all think like magicians, in the end. You think the atoms in the bomb won't still be exactly where they were before you tried to change things, just because they have no reason to be? The universe doesn't care about reasons. It's under no obligation to make linear sense. Perhaps all the atoms in the man, the bomb, even the time-traveller, will snap back to where they "should" be just out of inertia.

So what do we expect, when we think about history? Do we expect science? No. We expect meaning. We expect a coherent narrative. We expect it to work like magic.

Behold! The world according to Faction Paradox, such as it is.

5.02 Control

Here's Mother Nod's "face," bird-like and delicate, twitching on her scrawny neck and lit by the light of a television screen. Darkness all around her, the Chief Executive behind her. As Tiffany's already suggested, it's tempting to think of the Executive's innermost shrine as being the ultimate control centre, the War-Room from which all the world's media is monitored, controlled and if necessary shut down… and don't they wish it were. But whatever the truth, it's safe to imagine other screens, hissing and flickering in the dark. It's just as safe to imagine Father Danzael, hovering somewhere in the background, only becoming visible when there's a particularly bright burst of screen-light to mark out the edges of his mask.

'She's doing it again,' chirps the Mother. Higher-pitched than ever.

The Chief Executive leans forward, and the light creeps up his antlers as his face moves toward the screen. Predictably, it's Tiffany who's just appeared on the monitor.

'Is *this* one of ours?' he asks.

'I, err… don't think so,' says Nod, with the voice of someone who's trying to cover the fact that things are hopelessly out of control. 'But… there are so many. So many back-ups. The archive…'

'Could be a leak,' suggests Father Danzael. 'Someone smuggling tapes out of the archive and selling it on. The contingency material.'

‘Unless that really is Tiffany,’ Mother Nod suggests.

Slowly, the Chief Executive lowers his head to look down at her. The Mother looks away, embarrassed.

‘Do we have a catalogue of all the contingency tapes?’ he asks.

‘No… no, not really,’ the Mother admits. ‘They’re all labelled, but… there were so many people working on the project…’

‘So we can’t tell whether this is something we made, or if it’s getting creative,’ concludes Father Danzael. ‘Either way we can’t do a lot about it.’

The Chief Executive stands back, and rears himself up to his full height. Ever seen that painting, *Monarch of the Glen*? No? Never mind.

‘We should prepare a statement,’ he declares. ‘Would anyone care to make suggestions?’

Nobody speaks. Partly because nobody wants the responsibility, and partly because they’re secretly quite interested to hear what the image of Tiffany is going to say next.

5.03 The Collective Noun for One Man’s Murder

Details on the shooting of Waco Black are hard to come by. Contrary to fast-spreading rumour, he *wasn’t* shot live on television, though it may be significant that people expect it to have happened this way. If any footage exists then it’s much, much too valuable to be broadcast, and will be sold off to the highest bidder at a later date.

Right now various accounts are circulating around the world’s pressrooms, all of them describing the same story but with occasional minor discrepancies. He was shot in his house, or on the tennis court (tennis court!) of his house, or his body was found bleeding into the swimming pool, and either the bullet went right through his head or right through his jaw or just took his face off. Every TV station reporting the story focuses on a different uncertain detail, giving the impression that half a dozen completely different deaths are jostling for attention.

Since this is a morning on which several fake celebrity deaths have already been broadcast, you can see why nobody’s quite sure whether to swallow any of this. Even those who do swallow it find it a bit of an anti-climax, nowhere near as significant as the first, faked, clip of Ms. Korta committing mass-murder in front of the TV cameras. The Waco Black story is feasible, but less real. In later years, true to his

"crucifixion" obsession, retro-fans will come to see him as the one whose death marked the turning-point of this affair—the first corporeal casualty of this particular apocalypse. His uber-form is, indeed, much more interesting now his core-body's not around to flash its fake filed incubus-teeth and make vacuous pronouncements about modern society.

What's ironic, though, is that he wasn't killed as a result of Tiffany's interview footage… at least not directly. The assassin was not, as the media immediately expects, either a fan of Tiffany's who wants to make her dreams come true or a fan of Waco's who took his idol's advice a little too literally. Well, of course it wasn't: ritual or no ritual, it takes more than that to produce a generation of killers. In fact, when the gunman's image is finally dragged in front of the cameras he's revealed to be a thick-set, clean-cut, crop-headed young gentleman whose lack of respect for pop culture is demonstrated by the fact that he wears a *shirt* rather than a t-shirt.

Waco Black has been attacking the moral majority of his native country ever since his career began. This was demographically a shrewd move, as it was clear the moral majority provided a big, fat-necked target and had little or no real influence over the media. In short, only a few thick-set, clean-cut, crop-headed families would ever really be offended by anything he ever did or said. And even then, never offended enough to actually do anything about it.

You see, the decision to support Tiffany Korta's "Let's kill the famous" concept was made in a rush, just so Waco didn't get left behind. Even his management didn't think through all the consequences. While he was just using vaguely blasphemous imagery he was safe, but the second he made an overt connection between his business and *real* death… ah, well, the public psyche is a delicate thing. He should've known, really, that the moment he said, 'Some people deserve to be killed' there'd be a million and one people to answer, '… starting with you.' A million of them were just kidding.

5.04 Wider View

On the ground, around the perimeter of the arena, there's a sense of envy sweeping through the news crews. *They* don't have helicopter coverage, like the three stations which have now moved their "flying eye" teams into position over the arena. *Their* employers thought this whole thing was too trivial for full aerial coverage, just because there's nothing actually happening here. Hah! Damned middle-management.

In truth, none of the helicopters are news helicopters. Two of them

belong to local radio stations, who use them for bird's-eye-view traffic reports, while the third is the private property of a local businessman with connections. Whatever's drawing the TV people to this site, it's not yet strong enough to break *all* the rules of broadcasting, and it'd frankly be ridiculous for any major satellite or cable station to send out the chopper teams just to hover over an empty—*almost* empty—pop venue. The locals, though… the locals aren't going to miss a chance.

'Move in towards the ambulance,' one of the helicopter passengers tells his pilot. They've already swept over it once, but it doesn't hurt to double-check. "Ambulance" says "drama," and there might at least be a good side-story for the morning radio headlines. Someone injured as a result of the hysteria, maybe.

The pilot does as he's instructed.

'Anything?' he asks.

But it's hard keeping the spotlight still, especially in these conditions, with the rain smearing up the windows. There are definitely people standing down there, in the mud near the ambulance. The passenger just isn't sure how many, since they seem to flicker on and off as the beam fixes on them and then loses its way again.

'Can we open this window?' the passenger asks the pilot.

5.05 Inangela in the Underworld

And Inangela's running down the tunnel, but it's the kind of running you only do when you can't run properly any more, with a spear in her side and spit in her mouth that burns like pure alcohol. Breathing hurts already, something not helped by the fact that the air down here (if there is air, and if the Ship isn't keeping her alive some other way) is like warm scotch, stinging your eyes and burning out your throat.

The tunnel ahead is invisible. Whatever power runs through this place, whatever wavelengths hold it together, the tubes and pipeways of its body are black—black that speaks of severed optic nerves. Invisible, but Inangela knows what's there anyway, the same prickling, modern-day skin-sense that lets you feel the crackle of changing channels. Her eyes draw in the black light, stretch it inside her head, until it's turned into ultra-violet and fills up her skull like a painful, purple-tinted x-ray. Sometimes, running through this darkest of all dark places, she even sees the curve of the wall as a split-second flash of colour. A violet universe.

In the most straightforward, human terms, it's like running along a

subway tunnel. So, so easy to make the “subway” comparison. The sense of running along the tube, trying to reach a station, to reach some point of light and safety before the train hits your back. Easy because of the screaming. The noise of unseen, unspecified elements moving through the veins of the Ship, nuclear or beyond-nuclear materials being pumped through its body, the screeching of fuel and fusion under its smooth, bruise-coloured skin.

She conditioned herself to see this. She conditioned herself just to be here. She surrounded herself with ritual until the process, the Ship —whatever you want to call it—was all she could see.

The light from the helicopters was just a trigger, that burning, brilliant glare letting her reach such a point of intensity that the Ship could connect with her and take her into its body below the ground. No un-primed human being, unprepared by the proper ceremony, could get here.

Not that here is necessarily the place to be, as she’s starting to understand.

The key to understanding the Ship, as Inangela now understands it from inside its belly, is to think of it this way. This architecture can’t be taken for granted. Nothing works from a single angle. In our world, three times seven is the same as seven times three. But here in the Ship… in the world of black light and infinite curvatures, three times seven and seven times three might be two very different things and how can anyone, even someone primed like Inangela, make sense of that?

The turning on the left is circular, like every part of the tunnel, but being circular it’s *nine* feet wide and *nine* feet high. And what if, approaching it at a slightly different angle, you find yourself running down it while it’s nine feet wide and nine feet high, rather than the other way around? Does it lead to the same place, or will the tunnel twist again under your feet, shifting like a snake and eating its own tail?

The blackness of the fuel, screaming through the Ship-veins, is still at your back. Keep running! Keep running!

5.06 Valentine in the Ship

Compare and contrast:

The heart of the Ship, the heart of the town, the nerve-centre of this behemoth of black light and blacker-than-black mathematics. And if it’s exactly the same size and shape as the arena then, well, that’s not so surprising. One was modelled on the other, although you can

decide for yourselves which took the shape of which.

The floor seems to go on for miles, but if it looks perfectly black and perfectly smooth and perfectly featureless, that's because it's invisible to the human eye. In the distance, on all sides, the floor curves upwards into walls of what we might as well call obsidian, marked with flash-printed patterns and things that could be maps or circuit-diagrams or letters in a half-finished machine-language, all etched into the Ship's inner skin in glorious ultra-violet. For just a lightning-struck moment there'll be single window in one of the walls that lets in the light of the world-you-left-behind, and you'll see the reporters and the other carnivores, standing in the same place but in a different forum. Hard not to get the feeling that it's all part of the workings of the machine, the calculations of the Ship.

But at the centre of this place, the exact centre and exact navel of the world, is an altogether more visible kind of light. A single shaft of violet, so tall that it cuts all the way through the sky that isn't there, so precisely-defined that the shaft appears to have six sides and its corners are as sharp as the corners of a building. So bright that it becomes the axis of the world.

Did you ever wonder why nothing can travel faster than light? If this one perfect, all-devouring beam represents the power that drives the Ships, then Valentine finds it easy to see why nothing travels faster. This is the light that makes the rules. Nothing would risk attempting to out-do it in any way. It sets the standard for the whole of time and space. Valentine's felt a lurching, travel-sick sensation in his gut ever since the Ship dragged him down into its body, and only now does he realise that this entire, enormous chamber really is moving, slowly revolving around the axle of the shaft. The rest of the world turns with it.

What's most notable about the light, though, is that it illuminates nothing. The violet stays within its perfectly-defined column, none of it bleeding outside the perimeter of the hexagon, none of it allowing this nerve-centre to be seen in anything but near-darkness. Next to this axis of the world he's invisible, or at best just the hint of crumpled overalls hanging on tired, skinny shoulders, and perhaps that's a good thing.

There's nobody else here, apart from the groups of TV people who briefly blink into existence on the edges of the arena. There's just Valentine and, not far away, the ambulance. The Ship evidently decided to swallow his vehicle as well, which tactically speaking wasn't a good move (the Ship can't know about the bomb, but Valentine buries the thought as soon as he thinks it, in case it can hear what's going through his head). The ambulance is parked so close to

the light that the violet's scorching the side of one of the fenders, and he wonders what would have happened if the vehicle had been parked three feet to the left and the beam had gone right through the box.

The box, and the dying girl in the mask.

Again, Valentine buries these thoughts.

5.07 Land

The second casualty of the Tiffany Korta "event" is less straightforward than Waco Black. The rolling news stations remain unsure how to report it, even to the point where it can't be wholly classified as either "related news" or "other news." The lines are blurring now. To explain:

A long, long way from here, in one of those parts of the world where it's still yesterday evening, a boy burned a flag. It was the flag of his native country, and you know how sensitive people can be about that. Appropriately enough he carried out this little act of rebellion in the forecourt of a twenty-four-hour stopover, in full view of the world, the town and the petrol-pumps. Nobody has established beyond doubt why he did this. It's been suggested in one report that he was a Waco Black fan, or at the very least a fellow wearer of mascara EVEN THOUGH HE WAS A BOY!!!, so he could well have done this in tribute to his late idol. Waco, remember, used to burn flags himself before it became a marketing liability.

The wider view, unstated in the popular media, is that the boy was simply a victim of this great new non-geographical world. One of the millions of people, miles apart but touched by the same process, suddenly realising territory meant nothing to him at all. It's feasible that on some level, the only way he had of expressing this was to cover the most symbolic territory-marker he could find with lighter-fluid and show the world how easily it burned.

It wasn't a demonstration the world particularly wanted to see. It's important to understand that in spite of the way the later newspaper headlines will describe the scene, nobody consciously *intended* to kill the boy. There was no lynchmob, no carefully-planned nationalist backlash. There was just a prickling in the air, a certain sensitivity in an already-sensitive population, in a town—like most towns—used to sudden acts of aggression in the form of the War. Eye-witnesses claim that the first group of people to surround the boy, actually other teenagers rather than fully-grown conservatives, were explicitly saying something about the War (and, by association, the sacrifices people were making to it) when they started pushing him around. Nobody

stopped the flag burning, even after the boy dropped it. Putting out the fire would have meant stamping on it, and stamping on it was just as bad as burning it. That could be why someone, in a moment of impotence, started kicking the boy instead. Remember: not planned, not deliberate. Just A to B to C.

5.08 So?

So what *is* this crime, this killing? A result of the Tiffany Korta fiasco, or of War-time paranoia? Even as the politicians worry their uber-forms are spilling over into the celebrity world, where they're vulnerable to attack, the news teams realise they're no longer sure which stories classify as "showbiz" and which are "political."

Everything is becoming a single thing. A single entity. One knot of experience.

5.09 A Light at the End of the Tunnel—

—no, wait. That's not the end of the tunnel, that's just the middle, because the tunnel's *all* middle and the curve goes on forever (or so it seems, in those moments when it flashes into the visible spectrum). Nor is the object, which moves *across* the tunnel up ahead.

Inangela has no option but to stop running, even with death at her back. Death is preferable to the pain in her lungs and the torn nerves in her legs. Her boots weigh her down, however fashionably, but she suspects that if she starts to unlace them here, she'll be dead by the time she's finished. She's already dropped her leather coat somewhere in the darkness, maybe hoping to put down a marker, just in case the tunnel veers back on itself.

The light, the point of violet, is still moving across the tunnel. To Inangela it seems human, a human shape bleeding light into the walls, which makes her wonder whether she's finally going to see a real-life daemon. But no. Not as such, anyway. The girl is passing through the wall in front of her, not following the tunnel but taking an opening only she can see. To Inangela it looks as if there's a solid stretch of wall there, flash-printed patterns flickering on and off along the length of her optic nerve.

Conclusion. The girl knows ways to move through this place which don't involve following the path ahead. She knows the pipeways as well as the fuel does. This thought is what gives Inangela the strength to move again, in spite of the needle-sharp, vodka-laced things in her throat and her side. The thought that she might, just, be able to get

somewhere that doesn't mean following the "usual" route.

The screeching of the fuel gets louder and quicker and darker as Inangela limps after the beacon-girl. Threatening to vent itself down the tunnel and kill her right away, rather than let her find a new angle.

5.10 Fear and Power

Fear. The fear that when something happens once, it cuts a pathway through culture and through experience, and all of a sudden it's so much easier for it to happen again. And quite right too. Why do you think it took the King of France so long to help the American rebels, when they started their war against the King of England all those years ago? Because he knew that if an army of low-born men could dispose of *one* King, they could dispose of two, or three, or more. But he couldn't resist getting involved, in the end. His last words, when he went to the guillotine in 1793, might as well have been: 'I fucking *knew* it.'

Fear. In those parts of the world where the politicians are young and vicious and understand the New Venality of the mass-media, they're already talking about the events of this night. It's hard to credit it, really—that a Councillor or a Member of Parliament would even acknowledge the existence of Tiffany Korta, let alone worry about a single thing she says. The shooting of one of her fellow performers, however, puts cordite in her words.

The less successful, more media-aware politicians stop in their tracks and think about all the television appearances and photo-opportunities they've inflicted on the world in the last two years. They remember standing next to pop stars at benevolent charity functions, performing well-rehearsed party-pieces on chat shows to impress the younger voter. They've made themselves celebrities, not leaders, and their assumption was always that celebrities were safer. Now they imagine a lone assassin in a squalid bedroom somewhere (lone assassins, traditionally, never have sitting-rooms or kitchens), pinning up a newspaper photo of Senator X standing next to all five vocalist/dancers of Girl Party with a big grin on his face in the hope that someone might mistake him for the unseen Sixth Member. They imagine the assassin crossing off the faces in the photo, one by one, saving the corpulent middle-aged gentleman for last.

But there's a subtext here, isn't there? There's a different kind of fear at work. Every politician knows, instinctively, that he won't have made his mark on the world unless someone tries to assassinate him. So if they're aware of that (and they are), then… what have they

learned, from the last few hours?

They've learned that when the angst of the human species starts to break through the skin, and something starts to move under the surface of the world's conscience, *they're* not the ones who are expected to be the God-Kings. Hard for them to believe, to even think, that Tiffany Korta means more than they do. They've always believed that even if the icons and the pop stars are more famous than they are, it's all distraction. The public are so caught up in celebrity, nobody ever realises who's *actually* running the world. But they've just learned there's a genuine power in what this contrived little girl has set free, and that they have no control over it at all.

They start to make plans, to arrange extra bodyguards, just in case. In truth they're only *hoping* they'll need bodyguards, because if someone tries to kill them, the status quo will be restored.

5.11 Naked in the Presence of the Queen

Inangela, the chubby goth girl, was right. This is a crucible, and even Valentine can see that now (although he'd have to admit, somewhat guiltily, that he knows one thing she doesn't—he didn't have the nerve to tell her about the lack of a timer mechanism on the bomb).

This awareness makes what he has to do so much easier. B may lead to C, but you need just the right set of circumstances to get through those last stages of X, Y and Z. If he'd just found himself standing in a field surrounded by journalists, would he really have been able to use the bomb? No: of course not. But *this* place… this place, with its bursts of invisible flash-fire and the far-away screeching of huge, subterranean engines, is the very essence—the very model—of the War.

This is where he's been heading all his life. Or so he's now telling himself. Once again, he becomes startlingly aware that he's going to die. But it's easy to be centred once you've reached the centre.

Valentine takes a step or two towards the shaft of light at the heart of the chamber, and it doesn't make him any brighter, although from here the glow's almost strong enough to make him stop blinking forever—your eyes can only burn *so* much. The other lights, the patterns around the wall of the chamber, seem to become more agitated as he approaches. He doesn't let it bother him. What's worse is the smell, the chemical trace that gets stronger with every step he takes. It's like cheap spirit. Like acid and alcohol, the chemical by-

product of Ship science.

It's only now, so close to the beam, that he realises there's something inside it. This close, you can plainly see it: a turning, hard-shelled body suspended in the light. Which is to say, it looks like it's turning, although in truth it's the chamber itself that's doing the revolving. A figure, crucified at the centre of the world.

At first Valentine assumes the figure's a human being, surrounded by pipes and tubes and electrical wiring. Isn't that the way he's always imagined the owners of the Ships, after all? People wired into the machine like computer game addicts? But the closer he comes, and the more the bug-vodka chokes his body, the more he sees. It doesn't look human at all. It's as mutable as the Ship, part of the same process, black as videotape and just as magnetic.

If it's any one thing, that thing is an *insect*. Or something very much like one. Parts of its outline fold and unfold, fold and unfold as it revolves in front of Valentine, constantly opening new sections of its carapace and displaying itself from new angles. The things he originally saw as tubes now seem more like limbs, black spindle-arms that stretch down through the length of the light-shaft and into the floor of the chamber. Its wings… no, he can't see its wings. Strangely, he's left with the impression that its wings are too big even for the shaft, and must be folded away somewhere even *deeper* under the earth.

Don't the stories say that the "crews" of the Ships of War look like insects? People modified by the technology of the War, to the point where they become as drone-like as ants or flies or mosquitoes? Absurdly, Valentine realises he isn't sure whether someone told him this or whether it's just the way *he's* always imagined it. If there's any truth in it at all, then this poor, spindly, crucified creature could have been human, once. Before they changed her. Whoever "they" are, in this case.

As the chamber rotates, Valentine's sure he sees her trying to lift one of her limbs. To point at him? To accuse him of something? To beg for help? Whatever the reason, it only helps him to make the final leap from Y to Z.

5.12 SCART Tissue

Wars make legends. Wars are good at that. In Europe they still talk about the near-mythical Christmas Day of 1914, when the trench warfare of World War One was briefly halted in order for the men to clamber out of their diseased, gas-sodden holes and play a friendly

game of football. In England they still like to claim that the English side won, because time's been contracting since then and these things are as important now as all those years ago. The legends of this current War mostly involve the Ships, but these are sharp-edged, masculine legends, more like speculative technical details than fairy-stories. At least three daytime satellite channels run non-stop programmes on the military hardware of previous wars, supplying the need to know what weapons *might* be able to do these days.

It's only natural that the legends (i.e. stories of what could be true) and the jokes (i.e. stories designed to *mirror* the truth) should enter each others' territory at some point. Even those who don't seriously believe the Ships to be shark-like and predatory tend to describe their supposed capabilities as organic functions. It's traditional to refer to sea-going ships as "she." It's becoming normal to refer to Ships of War as he *or* she, expecting they might be able to mate.

The end-all of these legends regards the possibility of a mating between a Ship and a human being, though earlier versions of the story involve a mating between a Ship and a chimpanzee, as though the story needed to be tested on animals first. God knows, machine/ man hybrids were common enough on TV screens even in older, more conventional Wars. Fighter pilots wired into the seats of their planes, every inch of skin hidden behind computer targeting systems and oxygen tubes. Laser-guided weapons with cute partly-human acronyms like EDGAR or CLARICE or JOE-48, missiles with faces painted on their tips, patted on the "heads" by fat generals as if they were much-loved children.

The current iteration of the Ship/ human cross-breed story tells of a woman re-made over and over again by one or other of the War-time powers, every version of herself becoming more susceptible to the peripherals and combat systems of the Ships of War, no doubt growing SCART and MIDI sockets into the bargain. Because you didn't *seriously* think there wouldn't be a pure Freudian sex-angle to this.

The name often attached to this alleged hybrid-form is Compassion, a name smacking of wilful irony, in much the same way that the early nuclear device used to kill 100,000 people at Hiroshima was called "Little Boy" or that certain missiles used to be designated "Peacekeepers." The implication is that Compassion is now the mother of all future Ships of War, at least conceptually. The deeper implication is that she's the personification of the Military-Industrial Complex itself.

Most people, hearing this story for the first time, immediately imagine Compassion as looking like a pin-up on the side of an American WW2 fighter-plane: all red hair, freckles and suspenders.

The moment they hear the word “mother,” however, they instantly imagine something somewhat larger.

5.13 This Instinct is What Will Damn You

The girl was gone, by the time Inangela limped over to the wall of the tunnel where she’d made her exit. It didn’t surprise Inangela to find that when she approached the curve at *this* angle, you could see the structure of the place unfolding into a new side-tunnel, its entrance flicking itself on and off like a strip-light coming to life.

When Inangela spots the girl again, she appears to be walking at an odd angle, a point of light stuck to the arc of what Inangela currently calls the ceiling. The girl shows no sign of noticing Inangela at all, although from this distance Inangela can start to make out some of her features in the occasionally violet light. Inangela wonders, now, whether the girl sees *her* skin shining that brightly. She doubts it.

‘Urrrm,’ she shouts, which is as good an opening gambit as any. ‘Urrrm, hello?’

The girl doesn’t respond, but turns through a newly-discovered opening. This time, Inangela reaches the opening in time to see the girl step through it. It’s a hole in the wall of the Ship, quite clearly, but one which leads… outside? It looks like outside. Like looking through the window of a ‘plane and seeing a place that *isn’t* carpeted and air-conditioned and fully-serviced.

What’s she looking at? She’s looking at a road, but tilted at a hundred-and-twenty degrees (ish), so the road becomes a vicious slope across the “eye” of the Ship. The night sky is at the bottom of the image, the tarmac near the top. The girl is walking away from Inangela, almost upside-down, out of the Ship and into the night air. She keeps glowing as she moves from one world to the other, but it’s not the ultra-violet/ violet glow of the tunnel any more. She moves like a ghost.

Inangela notices, *thinks* she notices, a knife in one of her hands.

Then something else moves across the circle of the image, rapidly and from the top “corner,” moving along the upside-down road. An ambulance, swerving to avoid the girl. The girl barely notices. Barely notices the other vehicle, black and bulky and rusted at the corners, that’s coming in the other direction. The girl’s just intersecting this scene.

It seems familiar, of course, but all this happens so quickly. Even as

the ambulance is colliding with the van in the past, Inangela is losing her concentration, stumbling in the darkness of the Ship. When she stumbles she's no longer fixed on the exit, and before she can hit the floor she's focusing on another aspect of the Ship's structure, going from three-times-seven to seven-times-three. The porthole vanishes. Everything changes. Before now gravity hasn't really been bothered about Inangela, and the Ship has let her walk on its inner skin at any angle she chooses, but now she's quite specifically *falling*.

5.14 Proper Measures

The War forecast (which *does* exist, an open secret in television circles even if nobody would be tasteless enough to mention it publicly) says "sudden death." It's getting worse all over the world, although it's one of those stories that doesn't fit anywhere on the news. "Record War Incidents" is a non-story in the same way that "Record Rainfall" is a non-story, at least until there's footage of whole communities washed away by the floods. When entire towns begin to vanish off the map, then it'll be worth mentioning.

But there is an unusual amount of War-material in the headlines, as those just waking up to the early-morning bulletins are discovering. The gaps between the other stories, about Tiffany and Waco and boys kicked to death outside service stations, are filled with the background noise of rocket-fire.

The news teams are looking for excuses to mention the morning's attacks. Why? Because even though they can't prove it, and wouldn't risk saying it for fear of a rocket-strike hitting them, they can't help feeling it's all connected. That whatever powers run this War have seen the other events that are now set to A—B—C across the world and have decided that more pre-emptive strikes are suddenly necessary, that certain locations need to be wiped from the public memory before things become critical.

The War-powers aren't the only ones reaching the conclusion that certain things have to be stamped out before it's too late. In the nation-state where the boy with the flag met his untimely end, one leading member of the Senate is already pondering the thought that certain aspects of modern culture are as dangerous as they are undesirable. The legislation he'll attempt to introduce, just a few months from now, will be specifically designed to curb the exposure given by the media to "wilfully harmful" influences (meaning that if it hadn't been for these modern pop videos and their pretend-revolutionaries, the boy in the forecourt would never have made himself a target… yes, some politicians know *exactly* who's to blame).

Reign it in! For God's sake, reign it in!

5.15 Yesssssss

No part of the Tiffany Korta "event" is remarkable, by the way. What's remarkable is that all of this should happen at once, within the space of hours. All the resentment that's ever been felt for the New Aristocracy, all the repressed fantasies and the buried disappointment, all that anxiety and all that betrayal: it's all coming to the skin of the world now. Whenever there's public tragedy, whenever a "much-loved" public figure dies or a non-government-sanctioned terror attack makes another bullet-hole in the face of the War-zone, you can be guaranteed of one thing. You can be guaranteed that the *majority* of people—the majority, mind—will only claim to be shocked and horrified afterwards. There'll be an instantaneous moment, however short, when that majority will think to themselves… '*YESSSSSS*!!!'

Partly because in that moment, the world briefly becomes more interesting, whatever the cost. And partly because every catastrophe, every mass-sacrifice, is a day-release for that brooding, scratching, buried thing that lies there under the ground, pushing at every waking thought in the world above.

5.16 Wider View, Reversed

Inangela has fallen through an opening in the tunnel, but not the one she was aiming for, with its reassuring car-crash. No, this opening leads out onto a much less hospitable scene. She's over the town. Miles over it, if she's any judge.

She's sliding out into the air, so her face is already emerging into the world and she's holding on for dear life. Inangela in caterpillar-shape again, but trying very, very hard not to drop, because she's fairly sure she won't turn into a butterfly before she hits the ground. So:

'*Aiiiiiiaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh*,' she says. It's not a scream of deep philosophical horror, which is, to be honest, the kind of scream she might previously have expected to hear on the inside of a Ship. It's a scream of don't let me fall *don't let me fall I'm miles up for God's sake just don't let me fall*.

It's a pity, because in any other circumstances this might be a beautiful sight—the whole town, seen from high above, framed in the circle of the Ship hatchway. Patterns written across its skin in streetlights, so complex that even without the mortal panic Inangela

wouldn't know where to begin reading their ritual significance. Assuming those *are* street-lights, anyway, the map of pin-pricks against the darkness. Even hanging on for her life, Inangela must be aware that the sky over the town isn't half-lit as it should be at this time of the morning. But she must be looking at the present. She can tell that much, because of the lines.

The lines. There: four of them, criss-crossing the town with a flawed but well-meaning geometry. Four-fifth of a unicursal pentagram, the route marked out by Inangela herself in the last five hours, and then some. It doesn't, at this point in time, strike her as odd that her path should be marked out in such vivid street-lighting.

What she *really* doesn't understand, even in this moment of doom, is how there can be an exit from the Ship up here when the Ship's supposed to be buried in the earth down there.

'You're not over the town,' says a bored-sounding voice from the tunnel behind her. 'You're underneath it.'

'Hhah?' says Inangela, as the root-tasting air blows up her nose and into her mouth.

'This is what the town looks like from underneath,' the voice goes on. 'Except the gravity's fucked, 'cos this *thing's* waking up. So if you let go then… you know. You're still going to splatter on the ground. Just from the wrong side.'

The voice pauses, then, and Inangela instinctively knows that the voice's owner is taking the opportunity to shrug. Unseen by anyone but the Ship itself.

'Hor?' Inangela manages to gasp.

The shape behind her sighs, grabs hold of her from behind, and starts to drag her back into the relative safety of the tunnel.

5.17 Incidentals

In a city halfway across the world, where the night's only just started to think about falling, a seventeen-year-old boy leans out of a sleek black (stolen) convertible and slaughters five pedestrians with a semi-automatic weapon. He only knows two of the victims by name. The assassin's own personal choice of music gets pumped out of the car as it rolls on by and the rest of the street runs for cover, which is enough to prove that it's pop-culture-motivated.

It becomes part of the uber-form of the Tiffany Korta crisis, even if there's no obvious causal connection: unlike the flag-burning boy, the newspersons *definitely* know how to classify this type of killing. Local

civic leaders make a note to mention the drive-by in every speech they make for the next fortnight, although even now they're all wishing for a really *big* atrocity, something that'll let them demand whatever legislation they damn well want. If only the young people listened to pro-terrorist music instead of pro-gun music, life would be so much easier.

The third definitive, casual casualty of the crisis is also gun-related. It occurs seconds later and eighteen-hundred miles away, when a team of armed police break down the locked door of a basement in a gin-soaked apartment block and find themselves facing a modern-day black mass. Ten bone-masked local residents, none of them older than twenty-two, have kidnapped a stray animal from the streets outside (noisily, too, hence the tip-off to the police) and are now slitting its throat over a pentagram that'll later be described as "obviously occult." These teen and twentysomething ritualists, led by a twenty-year old individual with a leather jacket and a petty criminal record who calls himself the Grandfather, have been brought together by the common belief that this is the last night of the world before what they call "Ghost Point." The news stories are signs.

All of them have, after the ingestion of wild mushrooms and cheap beer, seen a "great whiteness" in the dead air between satellite stations that speaks of the coming apocalypse. At midnight it'll happen, and thus they have to prove themselves to be among those who understand. (Midnight *their* time, you'll notice, several hours after midnight in Inangela's country. Every nation is at the centre of the world, when there's an apocalypse due.)

All these things will be revealed later, in the shadow of the night's other events. For now, though, the main point of the story is that one sixteen-year-old cultist is shot dead by the police in the opening moments of the raid. The official version is that the boy was among those who'd been slicing open the dog, but that he'd turned to face the police with knife in hand and started screaming at them in the kind of frenzy you only get from amphetamines. There's no evidence to dismiss this account, except that the boy wasn't shot *exactly* in the front.

This story isn't as widely-reported as the drive-by, but in many ways it's much more significant. This isn't one of Valentine's protest-marches, where the police do nothing but stand still and break the lines of communication. This is bona fide police brutality, by God! Even if the victim was being driven by teen hormones and (suspected) drugs. And a lot of people are going to be angry about that. Angri*er*.

5.18 The Coming Horror

Inangela lies on the floor of the tunnel, the pipelines screaming in the distance, the cool underground-air from the hatchway on her face. Arms spread wide, legs stretched out. Recovery position for anyone who's been out on the booze. She's sticking to the tunnel wall, but there's enough gravity from the hatchway to let her know that from the outside she'd look as if she were sticking to the ceiling.

Horror is standing over her, not at a perfectly precise angle, looking bored and waiting for her to get her strength and her breath back. This, thinks Inangela, must be how beached whales feel before someone comes to blow them up as a health hazard.

Horror. But she looks different here in the Ship's ultra-violet, crackling with light just like the *other* girl, if not quite so intense. There are changes on the surface, too. She seems… slimmer. There's a discreet ring through her nose, which Inangela finds hauntingly familiar. Hair's different, as well. Longer. Long enough to make a dyed-purple ponytail at the back. She's still wearing the combats and the ugly boots, but there's a t-shirt Inangela's never seen before, stretched over breasts that aren't what they were. The image on the t-shirt depicts a skinny, pallid, unpleasant-looking male goth, nailed in cruciform position to what looks like a mushroom cloud.

HE SINNED FOR YOUR DEATHS, reads the legend. Overall it isn't Horror's usual style at all.

Faced with all of this, Inangela asks the obvious question.

'Have you lost weight?' she says.

'Yeah,' says Horror, without much pride. 'Are you ready to get up yet? 'Cos you haven't got much time before he sets off the bomb.'

Inangela is frankly amazed that Horror cares, and isn't sure whether Valentine would set off his bomb before they're out of here, but she has to ask. 'Time to do what?'

'Stop it.'

Hmm. 'I thought you didn't mind going along with all of this?'

'Yeah, well, that was before,' says Horror. Looking unusually agitated.

'Before?'

'Before. I'm channelling from the future, all right?'

'Don't be stupid,' says Inangela.

'You're inside a Ship,' Horror points out.

‘I don’t care!’ And I don’t care if I *have* seen it here already, thinks Inangela, time-travel’s still a fundamentally stupid idea. At least when somebody I know happens to be involved.

‘Look, just get up,’ Horror tells her. ‘You’ve got to stop the bomb, that’s all.’

‘Why? Because it’ll kill us?’

‘We should be so lucky,’ says Horror.

5.19 Z

Valentine drags the big black metal box out of the back of the ambulance, not hearing even a single muffled *clanggg* as it drops from the back of the vehicle and onto the invisible floor of the chamber. He doesn’t look at the girl in the back of the ambulance. He *almost* notices that the walls of the chamber are starting to flash faster, like lights on a fruit machine, becoming increasingly irritated by his actions. Does the Ship know what he’s going to do? Presumably not, if it brought the bomb right into its stomach. Unless Valentine was the one who insisted on bringing it with him…?

Never mind. Valentine, reaching the end of his particular story, is as focused now as he’s ever been—as focused as he’ll ever be. Coz’s pills have done their work well, even if they have a *slight* tendency to make their user delusional. He starts to drag the box across the floor of the chamber, until it’s as close to the central shaft as he can get.

‘VAL,’ says the voice of Coz.

It comes from all places at once. It resonates around the curve of the chamber, turns the whole scene into a speaker, makes the TV people in the arena flicker on and off. Naturally, Valentine looks around. Not up—not at the insect-queen he knows he’ll see hovering in the shaft above him—but around. There is, of course, nobody there.

‘VAL,’ the voice repeats, shaking the invisible floor and the invisible sky at the same time. ‘D’YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?’

Valentine looks back down at the contents of the bomb-box, absurdly worried that the booming of the voice might set it off. As if he isn’t planning to set it off anyway.

‘Ship,’ he says, to the disembodied Coz.

‘VAL,’ the voice stresses. ‘YOU’RE IN THE ARENA. YOU’RE HALLUCINATING, ALL RIGHT? I DON’T KNOW WHAT THE PROBLEM IS, BUT… IT’S OKAY NOW. YOU’RE GONNA BE OKAY.’

I’ve been on your pills, thinks Valentine, that’s the problem. But even that thought betrays him.

‘LOOK AT ME,’ says Coz’s voice. It’s a tone that Valentine knows well—this is the way Coz, and indeed Valentine himself, will talk to people suffering delusional fits. Raised volume, but reassuring vowels. ‘C’MON. LOOK. I’M HERE. IT’S ME.’

Valentine shakes his head, and tries to focus on the bomb parts.

Ships have defences. Everybody who’s heard the stories knows that. They’re primed to deal with the human psyche, they can get a hook into your nervous system and give you delusions a damn sight worse than anything you get from happy-pills. Or so Valentine should imagine. How would Coz get here? That doesn’t make sense.

‘I CAME SOON AS I HEARD ABOUT THE AMBULANCE,’ Coz explains. ‘YOU’RE ON TV, YOU KNOW THAT? COME ON, VAL. IT’S GONNA BE OKAY.’

On the edge of his vision, or whatever sense is trying to get a grip on the black light chamber around him, Valentine sees the whole world light up at once. Just for a moment, the complete arena is around him again, the reporters staring at him from the lip of the crater and trying to figure out who he is or what he’s doing. Some of the news people are climbing down the slope and onto the arena floor, now. In some places it even looks like there are fights starting between the rival tribes.

‘You’re not Coz,’ says Valentine. ‘You’re pretending to be someone I know because you want to stop me. It’s not going to work.’

‘VAL—’ the voice begins.

‘Shut up.’

‘YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND—’

‘*If you’re Coz, then why don’t you just stop me setting off the bomb yourself?*’ yells Valentine.

And with that final challenge, he finally looks up, at the glare of the light-shaft in front of him. From deep inside the shaft, the insect-queen stares back at him, looking as sorrowful as an insect-queen possibly can.

5.20 Horror Explaining

Horror helps Inangela to her feet, a process which requires an awful lot of struggling, something Inangela puts down to the complex gravitational conditions inside the Ship rather than to (say) her own weight. Turning away from the hatchway and the cool, almost-normal air outside, the screeching of the fuel in the pipes seems to rise in pitch and volume: an animal, realising that an old enemy’s re-entering its territory.

‘Jesus,’ says Horror, as the walking mass of neo-couture finally stands upright. ‘I’d forgotten what you were like.’

Inangela’s head snaps round to face her.

She says she comes from the future. She’s forgotten what I’m like.

‘Am I… dead?’ she asks.

‘No,’ says Horror. ‘You’ve gone all masculine. Don’t ask.’

‘What…? No, look. I meant what I said. Time-travel’s impossible. It’s too stupid to be real. So you’re a hallucination.’

‘Well, yeah,’ says Horror, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world and not pointing out that she just helped Inangela up. ‘But I’m still from the future.’

‘You’re a hallucination… from the future?’

Horror rolls her eyes. They glare white in the ultra-violet. ‘Okay, listen… you can’t really go backwards in time, right? But if everything’s connected… like, if every point of cultural reference is joined up to every other point of cultural… y’know… reference…’

(Hear her struggle with these words! The *real*, modern-day Horror would have given up after “connected.”)

‘…then you can predict everything that’s going to happen. ‘Cos everything in human culture’s already in the culture *now*. Just… waiting to come out. Okay?’

‘So you’re from a, um, projection of the future?’ asks Inangela.

‘You’re in a Ship,’ Horror repeats, in an obvious last-ditch attempt to end this conversation. ‘Whatever you fucking like. Let’s just go. You’ve got to stop the bomb.’

Horror turns to mooch off the passage, towards the screech of what’s presumably the main tunnel, but Inangela grabs her arm. It’s not just less Miss Piggy than it was, it’s more muscular, too. Still sweats like pork, though.

‘You’re a hallucination,’ Inangela repeats.

‘Yes,’ grumps Horror.

‘Is… *this*… a hallucination?’

Inangela isn’t sure what she means when she says “this,” but she gestures at everything in the vicinity and hopes Horror will fill in the blanks.

‘Yeah, the whole Ship’s a hallucination,’ Horror tells her, with some irritation. ‘Same way a TV show’s a hallucination. Same way… I dunno… same way language is a hallucination. It’s just a… a thing. A lump. Of human experience. Will that do?’

‘You *never* talk like this.’

‘I’m just quoting *you*.’

‘Right. Okay. A lump of human…?’

Horror’s never been able to grunt impatiently, and it’s nice to know that even the future version hasn’t cracked it. ‘That’s what a “Ship” is. War. Culture. Ritual. Get enough of it in one place, and it’s one big… doppelganger. Of *course* it looks like it can travel in time. That much stuff…’

‘I’ve told you before. Stop saying “stuff”.’

‘—that much *experience* in one place, you’re going to be able to look at most of what happened in the past and work out most of what’s going to happen in the future. That’s how it works.’

‘It didn’t crash here, then,’ Inangela points out, and quite acutely too, if she’s any judge. ‘Not like Valentine said it did. It was just… made here.’

‘Could’ve done both. It’s not, kind of… what’s that word you always use? Means when things are in a straight line.’

‘Linear.’

‘That’s it. It’s not like that.’

The screaming changes pitch again. The sound of new parts of the mechanism locking together, new functions of the Ship being fuelled and readied.

‘And it’s waking up, and some of that’s probably your fault,’ future-Horror concludes.

‘Oh,’ says Inangela. ‘Oh. So… we have to stop it waking up, or…?’

‘Fuck, I don’t care,’ says Horror. ‘I just know you have to stop that bomb. That’s why I’m here.’

‘Then why d’you need me? Can’t *you* stop it, if you’ve come all the way back to...’

Inangela stops talking, somewhere around this point. She stops talking because Horror stops being entirely there. Horror’s unusually-toned body flashes in lilac for a second, making sparks of light in the dark of the tunnel, and for a brief moment it leaves a chubbier, more confused-looking Horror standing in her place. There’s also a glimpse of something *else*, something simple and cartoon-like under the flesh.

Oh, she’s back again.

‘I can’t channel for long,’ she says.

‘I got that,’ says Inangela.

5.21 Bastard Racoon Has Arrived

It always starts with the adverts. Because the adverts are designed to get as deep into the human psyche as possible, because they're as barbed and as razor-edged as human culture ever can be, even if they're often appalling and unforgivable.

In this case it's an advert for a well-known chocolate bar, with its silent cartoon spokesman, the racoon (known to Inangela as Bastard Racoon, though in the official company guidelines it's nameless and genderless). Somewhere in the world, on average, the racoon will be playfully hunted by brightly-coloured children every six minutes. It skitters through the chocolate woodland in precisely the same patterns, over and over again and on millions upon millions of television screens, printing its distinctive loop-the-loop and figure-eight pattern into the experiences of its audience until the shapes it makes become as familiar as old prayers.

Bastard Racoon never speaks. It communicates mostly through shrugs, and through twitches of its nose. It's hard to see how anybody could hope to learn anything from this particular company-totem, and yet that's exactly what's happening. Though none of them are aware of each other yet, six people across this world—unconnected by geography or demographics—spontaneously become convinced there are *things* visible in this footage, however many times it's been shown and however obscure the Truth may have been before now. There's interference over the airwaves tonight, magnetic storms on magnetic tape, and let's not forget that ever-growing climate of anxiety. Those who see the Truth are primed for it now, more so than ever before.

The six chosen ones are sure, beyond any doubt, that Bastard Racoon's movements through the woodland are a form of communication. Something has *entered* this little animal-sprite. Its figure-eights are guided by a higher power, predicting things to come or simply summoning something from the future. Watching the racoon's erratic hunting-dance is a form of divination.

Only two of the six find ways of putting this into words, and as a result only two of the six 'phone the TV station. The cult of Bastard Racoon therefore never catches on, but it's already done its work. The future is wide open.

5.22 The Pilot

The tunnel seems narrower now, the evil-whiskey air more poisonous than ever, more likely to channel the engine-screeching in

Inangela's direction. She's passed the point where it hurts to run, but she's still stumbling, mostly because of the way the tunnel seems to move under her boots. Horror runs ahead, only the second time Inangela's seen *any* version of her run, and she at least looks as if she knows where she's going.

Having said that, Horror also looks as if she knows where she's going when she's driving, and she usually isn't driving anywhere.

'Whuh,' Inangela shouts after her, at least partly in an effort to get her to slow down. 'Whuh. Happening. Whuhh's… happening?'

'Think it's pulling itself out of the ground,' says Horror.

That could be it. Although if it's trying to get free, this "lump of experience," then something's still tethering it to the soil. Oh, of course. One corner of the pentagram, still keeping it pinned. One part of the ritual left incomplete.

Inangela still doesn't fully understand this. The Ship-thing may be as great as it is terrible, but… was she really trying to set it free, all this time? And now she's seen it, in all its greatness and terribleness, is that still what she wants?

And why is Horror intent on stopping the bomb? Because the world will be better if the Ship lives? Or just because the world will be different, and different's enough?

These thoughts could trouble Inangela all day, if she weren't distracted by that light, shining in the tunnel up ahead. Leaking into the architecture of the passage. And Horror's seen it too. She jars to a halt, and Inangela stumbles into her, thinking once again that someone projected from the future really should flicker like an SF hologram when disturbed. The girl, the shining girl, the girl they met at Miss Ruth's, the girl who was nearly hit by the ambulance, has noticed them now. Upside-down on the ceiling, she stops in the middle of crossing the tunnel, and turns her head to face them. The star in the middle of her forehead is burning in violet. The kitchen-knife in her hand is marked with blood, but even the blood's purple in this light.

There's the smile of an angel on her face. The smile of a billion iterations.

'Hi,' she says.

Inangela's sure that Horror looks as vacuous as the old, present-day Horror. Her voice, when she speaks, is slow and careful.

'You… went missing,' Horror tells the girl. 'You went missing. On the day that… on the day this happened.'

'S'okay,' says the girl. 'I'm here. Just… tying up loose ends,

y'know?' She looks at the knife when she says that, which seems ominous to Inangela.

'What are you *doing* here?' Inangela asks.

'Uh,' says the girl, a little nervously. 'I, uh… I think I'm a Pilot. Yeah?'

Inangela and Horror stare at her.

'This place is just like I looked, when I was an insect,' the girl adds. 'Only, kind of… bigger.'

Again, not much of a reaction there.

'So, what about you?' she asks Horror. 'You and the witch?'

'I am *not* a—' Inangela begins.

'Got to stop the bomb,' Horror interrupts. 'I'm the only one who could… look, doesn't matter. We've got to find the… the site.'

'Site?' the girl queries.

'Where the bomb is. The ambulance…'

'The control room,' Inangela tries.

The girl's face lights up, in as far as it's got any more lighting up to do. 'Oh, right. Sure. It's… that way.'

She points, and Inangela and Horror see the curve of the wall from her angle and realise there's an opening there which they never, ever would have found on their own. And at the same moment the floor curves upwards of its own accord, and the tubeways of the Ship all spasm at once, as the town clenches itself like a fist and the behemoth tries to punch its way through the ground. Inangela falls, and the world falls with her, and in front of her face she sees three times seven become seven times three and one and two and two and a half and *hear that screaming!*

5.23 Everything That Means Something is True

It's waking. This Ship of War and Culture and Ritual, this buried mass of humanity, this vast, ungainly and gloriously wilful metaphor for the things that move beneath the human psyche. Do they really come from anywhere else, the people who run this War? Are they truly, literally inhuman? Do they seed worlds like ours with technology that lets Ships and towns to come into existence, or do we create them ourselves—inevitably—and then sit by as the War-time powers harvest them for their own uses?

Either way. On the surface, everyone knows it's there as it comes up through the strata of cables and patterns and buried meanings. You don't need alien technology or second-rate bone-magic to understand *why* everyone can feel it. Everyone's sensitised to it, to the images it throws up on the television screens, to the words it spews out across the newspapers, all of them written and recorded by human hands but all part of one process. Systems of thought so complex that the frames of video and columns of newsprint outnumber and out-flank physical humanity itself. Some day all towns might be this way. Tiffany Korta's fear of the doppleganger applied to everything and everybody, en masse.

The Hollywood version demands that as it rises, the creatures which surround the arena—the warped, bestial, snout-faced things that gathered here as people, but which have now been mutated into something else—begin to howl in agonised voices. They spill into the centre of the arena, clawing at each others' pelts, fangs snapping and nails dragging in the dirt. The tribes begin to massacre each other, just as they've massacred each others' totems. They're drawn towards the bomb at the centre of the Pit by the same instincts that make human sacrifice such a cliché.

And why shouldn't it happen that way? It may be the Hollywood version, but all versions are equal now. That's what the rising of the Ship *means*.

5.24 Oxygen

The floor of the chamber buckles. There's so much stress in the Ship that you can tell something's going to break.

From deep, deep down in the machine, there's the long, painful, drawn-out groan of mile-long plastic tendrils trying to wrench themselves away from the rock of the town's foundations. This is how Valentine imagines it, anyway. Moments later the floor shifts again, and he loses his balance, and his forehead goes *trunt* against the door of the ambulance as he tries to climb back into it.

It doesn't stop him for more than a moment. Nor does the shrieking from around the wall of the chamber, a sound that could well be nothing more than a collective wail of agony from a thousand and one journalists, although Valentine can't imagine why a thousand and one journalists would all wail at once. When he re-emerges from the back of the ambulance, there's an oxygen canister under his arm—the hardest, heaviest thing he could find. It must have been tricky for him, getting it out from the storage area behind the stretcher without looking the girl straight in her big black eyes.

But Valentine's good at not looking at things by now. He ignores the shivering of the floor under his shoes, and the gaze of the insect-queen in her shaft of light, as he returns to kneel down over the box. There isn't even time for goodbyes here. He just has to get on with it.

The bomb has no timer. However, the two halves of Red Uranium are already in close proximity and they're sitting right in the middle of a nest of moulded plastic explosive. Ordinary, mundane, wonderfully unstable plastic explosive.

One good impact can trigger an explosion. This is what Valentine's been led to believe, because a great many of the 45,000 people whose deaths he's witnessed were killed in explosions. A bullet is ideal, but it's not as if Valentine's the gun-carrying kind. The oxygen tank is the best he can do.

He lifts the cylinder above the box, positions it so its edge is directly over the mass of the explosive. Maybe it's good that he has to do it this way. If he'd had a simple trigger, a little button to press, then it might all seem so much less visceral. Sparking the explosive by hand is bound to feel a lot like smashing in someone's skull. Maybe the skull of the girl in the ambulance. It should remind Valentine, before his inevitable demise, that this isn't like playing a computer game or launching a guided missile to kill Them at long range. This is *real* War.

5.25 Looking In

What's strange is that now she's lost future-Horror, somewhere in the labyrinth of the tubeways, Inangela feels a lot more confident about surviving this. It didn't seem right, really, that any Horror should come from the future and take the lead. Horror doesn't do that. Horror goes-along, that's what she's there for. Run-limping through the tunnel on her own, with the wall curving down towards her and the black mass of the fuel *definitely* gaining on her tail, Inangela suddenly finds herself with a sense of purpose.

It helps, too, that she knows roughly where she's going. The glowing girl—Tiffany!—pointed the way, but the way she pointed was more than a direction. It was a system of navigation. That one ultra-violet gesture, extending through the walls of the Ship, finding a pattern in its structure that a single human brain can comprehend and follow. Which must be a Pilot's job.

Inangela still doesn't know what the effects of the bomb will be. Nor does she know why Horror was the one who came back to change things. Nor does she know if things can be changed, because if they change then nobody will come back to change them. Maybe that's the

real reason she wants to stop the explosion. If this great big glitch in history doesn't get her recruited by Faction Paradox, then nothing will.

Suddenly, it's there. The opening she's been looking for, the hatchway that leads out into the arena, a circle of world-light in the darkness. She knows what's on the other side of it even before the shapes of the arena, the tiny speck of white that marks out the ambulance and the barking, shrieking figures that mark out the TV crews, are close enough for her to make out. The hatch isn't even set into the curve of the wall, it's just set into the middle of the tunnel, the only possible exit. She can't be more than ten feet away from the hatch before it vanishes again, folding away into the Ship's structure, losing itself altogether as she loses her focus. It doesn't vanish instantly, though. First the image shifts, as if some of the Ship's ultra-violet has crept out and shown the world in a different light, so that the reporters look like hunched, snarling animals and the arena looks more like a temple than a pop venue.

In the last moments before it disappears, it even seems to be another part of the Ship itself on the other side of the hatch. The arena is its control room, half in one world, half in *all* worlds, a single column of brilliant violet light at its centre. One figure, briefly visible against the glare. Obviously Valentine.

Inangela stops, only a yard or two from the spot where the opening vanished.

She's failed.

She can't get to the bomb. The bomb will go off, and the world will become a worse place, for whatever unspecified reason. She's not sure why. If someone had told her, two weeks ago, that a nuclear bomb would detonate inside a Ship of War then she'd have been… well, excited. Guilty, maybe, but excited. Just to see that mushroom cloud go up, and for time to burst open at ground zero. Even if the consequences would be appalling, even if for years afterwards nobody would be able to say a single thing about War or peace or culture or humanity without being accused of bad taste in the face of Armageddon—

—oh, look. She just got it.

5.26 The Past and the Future

Inangela, lying in her room with the portable TV. Face-down on her fat duvet, one elbow propping her up, scribbling a note in the back of one of her many, many doodle-infested notebooks. Someone has just

died, says the television. Not one of the many millions who die every day, by War or otherwise. Someone important, some famous. It doesn't matter who, because Inangela has been through this ritual any number of times. She always makes a note, in her own personal Book of the Dead, when a celebrity's body stops working and he or she becomes a Grandfather's Axe. She's had a special column for it in the back of every diary she's ever kept. Just in case there's a special significance in the order in which the famous die, which nobody else is qualified to notice. Admittedly celebrity culture is only a partly-open book to her, and she's not that great at remembering the names of the younger and more disposable pop idols, but that's okay because it's not the younger ones who tend to snuff it.

Sometimes, as we've already established, she'll *hope* that an ailing or wounded celebrity will die. She hoped for the death of the old Princess of Wales, in the hope of getting that one illicit thrill of 'Yesssss!' Felt guilty afterwards, when for several weeks the world became a tyranny of good taste.

Perhaps it's being here in the Ship that does it, this hallucinatory device of all the culture of the present-day, but Inangela can suddenly see the future even if she can't travel there. She sees a future in which the nuclear bomb detonates, breaks open the Ship's skin, creates an explosion never seen before in the history of humanity—an explosion of humanity *itself*, of War, Culture and Ritual combined. Its effect will not be, as Valentine expects, a wave of anti-War feeling in the civilised world. Its effect will be a blow to human meaning so large, the word "tragedy" itself becomes meaningless, any resonance it might still have being wiped away by the blast.

In the future, Inangela sees towns, cities, countries full of blank-eyed, empty-mouthed people, struck blind, dumb and dull, unable to do, or think, or say a single thing without it existing in the shadow of this one day. She sees people trying to pull their bones out of the wreckage, trying to turn the disaster into bland, black comedy but finding even *that* sense of meaning slipping away from them, their lives ending up as nothing more than bad t-shirts and hopeless, misjudged attempts at free speech.

There will be fear. There will be anxiety. There will be shock so great that it dulls all other senses. There will be, above all else, *good taste*. There will be nothing but a human species which goes on existing forever, with no sense of its purpose and no desire to ever, ever move, for fear of it creating another cataclysm.

Inangela sees all of these things, in the flashes of UV that light up the tunnel and make the walls shed their skins around her. When she looks again, she sees Horror—future-Horror—standing at her side,

next to the spot where the arena hatchway used to be. But future-Horror is strobing again, becoming her old self and her new self, and sometimes she's not even there at all. The screaming rises, and Horror looks at Inangela almost apologetically. *Can't hold on. The future wants me back.*

And one day, thinks Inangela, everything could be like this. Everything could be this big and this important, this dangerous and this spectacular. One day every town could be a Ship, and one day we could all be Pilots. One day we could all have bodies as big as the world.

But not if the bomb goes off. That one moment of interest, that brilliant and super-intense moment of meaning, would be the last moment of meaning there ever was.

5.27 Principles (1)

One of the more serious-minded news channels has no reporter covering the events (or non-events, or invisible-events) at the arena, but happens to be taking a much more highbrow approach to the breaking news. Four of its regular contributors are gathered around a grand semicircular desk that's been commandeered from the sports department, each of them armed with a notebook and a glass of water. Three of the four are "cultural commentators," which means they see three levels of meaning and irony in every frame of cinema where most people only see two (soon, when most people learn to see three, they'll be forced to move on to levels four and five and six). Their discussion of the Tiffany Korta/ Waco Black/ Grandfather Cult situation is an unsensational one, and whereas most channels are covering developments as an explosion of blood and outrage, here the "crisis" takes on a sense of lurking menace. Any similarity between this studio set and Tiffany's version of the secret Faction Paradox War-Room is coincidental, but amusing.

The commentators have already agreed that the last hour has demonstrated a need for coherent meaning in the popular psyche, and point to specific parts of the Tiffany interview footage as proof that the modern world is profoundly dissatisfied. One of them points out, with grim yet tasteful humour, that it's all very well talking about cultural complexity but it's not much consolation if you happen to be the mother or father of the flag-burning boy. All around the desk nod sagely, before attempting to be the first to say, 'But I also think there's an element of….'

They've forgotten something, here. They've forgotten that the life of the flag-burning boy was only precious because of that unique, never-

before-created system of meaning in his brain which ultimately caused him to be human. They've forgotten that his death is also about the loss of a certain kind of complexity from the world, and that's understandable. These people have to talk about the universe in terms of grand and meaningful symbols, the way magicians do, so it's not in their job description to consider the little pieces which make it up. None of them would dare to ask, or even think, whether the boy's death would have been a reasonable price to pay if it had made the world more glamorous rather than more tactful.

5.28 Principles (2)

And in the end, it all comes down to this:

We aren't matter. Matter carries us, that's all. We—everything we think of as "we," everything that makes up our vast, fundamental but nonetheless infinitely mutable identities—is pattern. It has no existence outside the matter, in the same way that the picture can't exist without the videotape. But take away the matter and put the pattern somewhere else and it'll still be *us*. We look at the baby's face or the kitten rolling in the grass, and we think we care about life and love and skin, about the cells that hold us up as we insist on existing. It's not true, of course. Our families, our friends, the animals that sit on our laps and demand attention… we don't know them, we've never even seen them. We only know, and love, and care for, our own ideas of who and what they are. How could it be otherwise, when their bodies keep dying and being slowly replaced with identical duplicates?

There are many ways of interpreting this, of trying to work out how we can ever hope to live that way, in a world where nobody has a true self and sentiment is all that holds us together. Inangela paints her magic cameras, insists on calling forth things greater than herself, and thinks: *The ritual is everything.* Valentine once again realises the enormity of what he's about to do, and thinks: *We give our lives up for a greater cause.*

Meanwhile Tiffany, wherever her core-self might be, says what she thinks on every channel that carries bulletins. None of her many selves are particularly eloquent, but she says it in bits and pieces, so you can only make it out if you plot the patterns in the interview footage. She says: Life will never, ever, ever be as important as the culture.

If the word "culture" can safely be used in this context, given that we're talking about a girl whose idea of personal development used to mean getting her navel pierced on live television.

5.29 Again

The chamber screams and thrashes and tries to shake itself loose from the ground, flickering in violet and ultra-violet and black, filling the chamber with the alcohol-stink of the insect queen. It knows: Valentine's sure of that now. The plastic explosive has, of course, failed to explode. Before the floor threw him onto his back, Valentine just had time to open his eyes (he kept them closed while he was trying to set off the bomb, naturally) and inspect the damage. The oxygen cylinder made a big soft dent in the putty-mass of the explosive, and made it huddle even closer to the Red Uranium, but obviously there wasn't that all-important spark.

Valentine struggles up onto his hands and knees, inadvertently kneeling on his overalls as he pulls away and ripping his clothing in half down one side. Which is, by anyone's standards, a minor detail now. Once he's got a grip on the canister again, he sticks close to the ground and crawls back to the bomb-box, ready for a second attempt. He's briefly aware that he's never, ever going to know which blow is the one that does the trick. He's only going to witness the failures. The success will burn his eyes, his hands, the sum total of his experience to nothing.

He lifts the cylinder. Gets ready to make the second blow.

'Y'know, you really shouldn't do that,' says the insect-queen, in a voice that sounds as if it belongs on MTV. As with so much else, Valentine simply ignores it. He brings the cylinder down.

5.30 Perspective

The wall remains a wall. The tunnel is filling up with the howling of the Ship, either in its birth-throes or its death-throes. It doesn't matter how much Inangela tries to focus on the spot where the entrance was. There's never a way through.

'No good,' she says. 'I can't get to the arena.'

Horror doesn't answer. A glance in the girl's direction reveals that there's less and less of Horror left, which is to say, she's there for less and less of the time. Her face, strained and unable to speak, is only visible one strobe-flash in every six.

'And I don't even know whether Valentine's *in* the arena,' Inangela tells her, raising her voice over the squawling of the Ship. 'It looked like he was in some… other place. Like the arena. Part of the Ship that's sort of… over it. I don't know.'

'…ntro.. oom,' Horror manages, through the flicker.

'What?'

'Con… ol roo..'

Yes. That's presumably where Valentine is, isn't it? Still in the arena, but the arena the way he sees it from where *he's* standing, caught up in the angles of the Ship. He doesn't see the TV crews around him, the big video-screen, the rain coming down out of the sky. Especially not if those pills of his are any good. He sees the control room of the Ship. Even if Inangela could get back to the world, it wouldn't be the world that *he*—

Hooooooooold on.

'This place is meaning,' she says, slowly, but Horror just stares at her. The future-girl probably can't even hear her. Inangela obsesses on the wall in front of her again.

'I can be Valentine,' she says.

Horror opens her mouth, as if to protest that this isn't the time for showing off, then blinks out of being for a couple of seconds. The wall doesn't react.

'War,' says Inangela. 'Listen to me. Not ritual, or… the other thing. Culture. Not culture. This is a Ship of *War*. It's got weapons and, and bombs, and it's used to kill people, and… and fuck it, it's very, very bad.'

Oh, the look on Horror's face. That look of, "I came back in time for this?" Inangela tries not to think about the conversation she and Horror once had, about the quintessential validity of re-programming yourself this way (well, that's how Inangela saw the conversation, anyway).

'I'm Valentine, and I'm part of this Ship,' Inangela insists, raising her voice as she hears the whine of the fuel and/ or the shriek of the countdown rolling up the tunnel towards her. 'There must be justice. There must be better government. There must be… God, I don't know… full electoral reform for the people of Zaderitz. Because that's the way I see things, and *this is about the War*.'

Open Sesame, she says. So the wall buckles, and shifts, and opens its eye, and on the other side of the opening Inangela can see the control room, the crucible as seen from the War's point of view. And there's Valentine, crouched down in front of the shaft of light, hunched over something that can only be the bomb.

Inangela turns to Horror, to say something witty one last time before she goes off to save the future. But Horror has already gone. Where she was standing, Inangela sees one last burst of light beyond

the normal human spectrum, and in that light there's just the after-image of an animal with a ring through its nose.

Inangela isn't sure what that means. But she has, in a very real sense, bigger things to think about. She lobs herself through the hatchway and into the control room.

5.31 Purple Worlds

It's an old technique, obviously. You re-create the world by shifting the focus. Everybody knows that if (say) you pick "purple" as your lucky colour, then you'll be more likely to notice the purple things in your life than anything else, and thus is synchronicity generated. Few people, however, take the time to do this consciously: to carefully, wilfully, re-narrate and re-describe the world they have in mind until purple becomes the centre of the universe itself.

This is as good a definition of "magic" as you're ever likely to hear. Magic, culture, language, symbolism… all the same, and all implying communication, which is why more than one person tends to end up inhabiting these purple worlds.

There is, sadly, a flaw with this magical principle. Purple worlds are delicate. They can be shattered in a second, and frequently are, usually by things which have no right to be in such finely-crafted environments. One explosive device, for example, can ruin everything.

5.32 In Brief

'In the last ten minutes, police have announced the arrest of four people believed to be members of a political extremist group…'

'Police have confirmed that they've arrested at least four people thought to be linked to a political activist group…'

'…just heard that four people have been arrested for alleged terrorist activities…'

'…that all four are former members of the Society for Common Rights…'

'…of the Common Rights Society, a left-wing organisation with a history of…'

'…an extremist splinter-group, formed out of the ashes of the Rights for a Common Society movement, but currently calling themselves "the Faction"…'

'……recordings made of the group's telephone conversations have confirmed that the four were attempting to acquire nuclear-capable

material…'

'…police say it's unlikely that…'

'…police say it's likely that…'

'…heading the investigation, has said that the anti-terrorist division is "concerned" about the availability of these materials…'

'…that no nuclear material was found in their possession.'

'…that although it's unlikely they could have assembled an actual nuclear weapon, police are still "concerned" about the activities of these groups.'

'…that the group has "no real influence".'

5.33 What You Are

The last stretch. Inangela runs, slides and hobbles across the vast, smooth, invisible expanse of the control room floor, towards the brilliant world-dividing shaft of light at the centre of the chamber. Up ahead the pictograms and circuit-patterns are re-imprinting themselves across the curves of the walls, over and over again, making new patterns in the ultra-violet with every passing moment. It looks as if the chamber's about to overload, like a computer bank in a '60s movie, self-destructing when it can't answer a simple paradox.

She can see them, sixty yards ahead of her. All the important elements, here in the middle of the crucible. The white block of the ambulance, glowing in the black light, and Valentine nearby. He's scrambling across the floor, trying to pick himself up, having been knocked off his feet by the Ship's heaving. Inangela's learning to roll with it now, not that she'll be rolling for long. Even if she stops the detonation.

And she has to. She knows she has to, because at the end of the day the only real death is the death of meaning. It shouldn't be possible to change anything, of course—not if future-Horror already lived through it, not if all the experience stored here in the Ship saw it as being inevitable. But… you know.

You have to try. If only because it's more interesting than not trying. It's not like there's any end result to humanity. We're already a time-travelling species; we already live in the future. You go from day to day in the hope that things are going to get better, or less painful, or more complex. If there's a true meaning to human nature then that's it. No point stopping just because you know you're doomed.

Fifty yards, and Inangela can see the bomb-box now, at the foot of the column of light. Valentine is picking something up off the ground,

something big and heavy-looking. Thankfully, Inangela's body doesn't feel as if it's bursting its stitches any more, although she suspects that could be something to do with the booze-acid in the air.

And her head's got better things to consider anyway, especially if these are going to be her final, most profound thoughts. It hasn't escaped her notice, for example, that she basically got into this place —into Valentine's version of the Ship and into the War—by using a magic word. Now, Inangela doesn't like being called a witch, partly for reasons of fashion, partly because she's fucked if she's prepared to believe in the Healing Spirits or start using the expression "oh my Goddess" just to prove a point. Inangela is a *materialist*. She is, in her own way, a rational person. A ritualist, too, but not because she believes there's any higher power in the universe that's holding her life together. No, she's a ritualist because she knows there *isn't*, and it's only ritual—ritual, magic, culture, language—that's giving any shape to her world at all. There's no Faction Paradox until you invent it, and it's funny how the experience of opening a magic door with a single phrase can really make you acknowledge what you are.

Let this be her latest credo, and possibly her last. Anyone who believes in the cosmic forces is not a real witch. *Anyone who refuses to believe in the cosmic forces is a witch by definition.*

Forty-five yards. Is everything slowing down? If not, then why does running across this flat, flat floor feel like running up a sharp, sharp hill?

Either Inangela's quite hideously out of shape, or Ship gravity's becoming even more erratic. Take your pick.

5.34 Ahhhh

The conversation with Horror that Inangela remembered, while she was opening the door to the control room:

'You're saying,' Horror began, but then she broke off for a mouthful of alcoholic cherryade. 'You're saying, here, that you think you can change the way the whole world looks just by saying some words?'

'Yes,' said Inangela.

'Just some words?'

'Yes. Well… in the right context.' And isn't "context" the same thing as "ritual," in this sense? (Yes, it is.)

'Pff,' said Horror.

'So you've never read a book, then?' said Inangela, convinced that this was the real argument-winner.

‘No,’ said Horror.

‘Oh,’ said Inangela.

5.35 Life Staples

Third time’s the charm. Third time’s always the charm. Valentine, who’s spent his life attempting to fight off the evil tentacles of corporate and cultural imperialism, has at least seen enough movies to know that. The assassin’s third shot is always the one that hits the target. The third place you search will always be the one that’s hiding the doomsday device. By the same logic, the third hard-metal impact is guaranteed to be the one that detonates the explosive, forces the two halves of the critical mass together and changes everything forever.

The Ship must know this. It must be why it keeps shaking him off his feet, trying to throw him into the light-shaft and the arms of the insect-queen, doing everything it can to stall him.

Valentine drags the oxygen canister back to the box, but this time he doesn’t avoid looking into the shaft. The chamber turns around its axis, and the face of the insect-queen, the Pilot, slowly comes around to face him again. He finds himself waiting for her before he swings the canister down and unleashes thermonuclear banality on the world. He wants to look the Ship in its eye before he kills it, kills her, kills himself and makes a great big wound in the side of the War.

The insect doesn’t exactly look impressed as he comes face to face with her. You could almost believe she looks pitying. The insect that knows too much.

Then she’s turning away again, and Valentine knows that the moment’s up. There’s no more drama here. There isn’t even any more opportunity for a last, unheard statement to the world before he triggers the bomb. It’s time, and that’s all.

Bizarrely, he remembers buying a box of staples from a cut-price stationary shop. Two or three years ago, now. He remembers the moment when he realised that he now owned 5,000 staples, and that as he didn’t do *much* stapling the box would probably last him the rest of his life. Just think about that: One little box of staples, and it represents the rest of your life.

And that’ll be the last thing he thinks.

On three.

One.

T

5.36 Sideways

Inangela rockets into Valentine's side, at exactly the same moment that the Ship quakes again, the machine-parts grinding below the ground and the ultra-violet roots snapping away from the soil. Gravity carries the two of them away from the light-shaft. The oxygen cylinder drops, and hits the side of the bomb-box with a sound that rings out like the chimes of midnight even over the roaring of the Ship.

Valentine, lying on his back under a sky that's gradually getting lighter, sprawled out against a floor that's starting to feel like mud instead of obsidian. Inangela, lying with two legs hooked clumsily over his body, struggling up onto her elbows, suddenly feeling a kind of moistness on her skin that isn't sweat. More like air after a rainstorm.

No explosion. A second and a half left on the clock.

Valentine turns his head, to look into the cool, black eyes of the witch-girl who's taken him from Z back to Y. And Inangela's already ripping off the mask, revealing the hot, bothered, mascara-smeared face underneath.

'Don't you *dare*,' she says.

But the world's still full of the screaming of the engines, or the screaming of the reporters as they rip into each others' skins, or the screaming of the helicopters overhead, and in the ground underneath them the body of the Ship convulses one more time in an attempt to wrench itself free and make itself known to the world. This could be the control room, it could be the arena, but either way seven times three and three times seven still aren't the same, because it's coming up from the earth and bringing all the buried meanings up with it.

It brings perspectives that have never before been comprehensible to more than a single person, and a sense of understanding generally thought to be impossible in the cold light of day, and for that one moment everyone in the arena can see it from every angle at once, so that every word, every symbol, every thought, every meaning takes on dimensions of its own.

And Inangela feels it, and sees it, and her core-body is still alert enough to know that this is the wrong physical place to be, and she tries to say so as she struggles to her feet but what she says is: 'Vw'ee tgo ot tge uto fo reeh…'

And Valentine blinks at her, and says: 'Awth?'

And Inangela says: 'Vw'ee tgo ot *og*!'

5.37 Narelgin

Ni yan niainiotti, shert'e a nommte nhew nithvergye asht't aler essem ot tresde uyo. Si't patr fo yevre tyolghyom nda yevre mestys fo nranegil ew veah: asht't hyw "karebownd fo itryela" otressi lwil wyalsa eb os upplaro. Ubt het Rutht si, itryela veern skareb onwd. Yonl oryu essnse kareb onwd. Ludgincin oryu essne fo Su nda Mthe.

Sa rfo het Rwa… ense mrof rehe, het slevi fo het myeen esem sesendl. Nda het mysee'n mys-een rea sa seronumu sa het senagl ni ist Psish, ro het odsg ti rebsde ot peke su ni khecc.

There. That wasn't so painful, surely?

5.38 Further Probabilities

'Yeah, I think terrorism's a good thing, don't you?' says the interview iteration of Tiffany. 'It's better than just, kind of, sitting there. Y'know? Except… you've gotta get the right target, 'cause otherwise it's just gonna blow up in your face.'

She giggles at that. For a modern pop performer, that's an unusually sophisticated pun on the words "blow up." Although right now she's the only one who's laughing.

At this precise moment in time, over three-million people across the world are going on-line and looking up the details of "how to build a bomb" or even "how to build a nuclear bomb." Not that they're all planning on doing it—they're just curious to see how easy it is. But over eight-hundred thousand are idly wondering what would happen if they *did* build a bomb. Just under four-thousand others, who already know the basics, are thinking about the materials in their garages and their toolshops and their workplaces and thinking just how easy it'd be.

Only 198 of the three-million harbour what might be described as a genuine *hate*. Many are the kind who burn flags, or who wear make-up deemed to be "inappropriate," or who grew up safe in the knowledge that if they went out alone at night, there was a good chance the police would kick the crap out of them before dawn. All of them either believe with a passion, or used to believe before their own lines of communication were severed. All of them want to be that one pariah/ messiah who saves the world with seconds left on the clock. Most of them hate so much because they've heard the story of the boy who got kicked to death for having political opinions (or just liking stupid music?), or the story about the boy with the bone-face who got shot in the back while rushing an armed policeman. Tiffany's words

don't make them do what they now do, because very few of them have time for a mass-produced little trollop like her, but they *do* prove something. If even someone like her can acknowledge the way the world's going…

Of the 198, only a minority will still be this angry tomorrow, especially since the real big news story hasn't even happened yet. This means that barely a dozen will seriously wonder where they can get hold of these mystical elements they've read about, like plastic explosive and Red Uranium.

By tomorrow, the authorities will be talking about "stringent new security measures" and "an increased risk of terrorist activity, not necessarily related to the War" and "removing certain delicate information from the public domain." This will make the angry dozen, the survivors of the process, even angrier.

5.39 Overground

At first, they thought the weather was causing problems for the helicopter. Which is ironic, since the local radio station uses it for weather reports as well as traffic updates. The rain was bad for visibility, it's true, but nobody was expecting it to compromise the chopper's control systems quite so severely.

And when the rain stopped, without warning, things only got worse. Instruments failed to function, though fortunately nothing vital, at least not for urban duty. Soon after that the equipment used by the on-board camera team began to show signs of fatigue, the built-in monitors sparking with static or just displaying white, empty patches of video.

Magnetic interference, that's the all-purpose answer being suggested by the passengers. Something building up in the area, getting worse by the second. "Worse by the second" makes an impression on a lot of the crew, despite the pilot's insistence that it'd take a *Hell* of a magnetic disturbance to crash 'one of these bastards.'

Even so. The last thing the crew films, down in the centre of the arena where the TV people are even now converging, is the ambulance. It's moving again, rolling away through the rain-dirt on the crater floor, with its tyres skidding round as it tries to pick up speed. The light's flashing on the roof, and it's doing its best to steer through the rival tribes while they argue and threaten legal action and attempt to divide the crater up into segments of their own. The ambulance, so still for the last fifty minutes, now seems to want to get out of here as rapidly as possible. Really, it's not a good omen.

The helicopter passengers, already nervous, start to subtly hint to the pilot that the ground might be a good place to be. The pilot assures them that everything's fine, even as the vehicle's buffeted onto its side for no reason anyone can identify.

5.40 Can They Do That?

Through the gates of the arena. Out onto the road, under a sky that's now pretty much day-lit. Valentine driving. Inangela in the passenger seat. Horror in the back—where they found her, once the moment of Ship-inspired madness had passed—with the girl in the mask who surely must be past saving by now. Even in spite of the siren, and the horns of the OB vans which are now starting to close in around the arena and form a blockade, it seems like a quiet time inside the vehicle. None of them speak.

The media have already felt it, the magnetic shockwave as the Ship-thing wakes up. Inangela has no idea what'll happen when it breaks through the surface, but she knows it can't be more than a few minutes until it happens. To an extent she wants to be there, to be part of the process when it comes out of the earth and makes itself known to the world. But then… it'll happen everywhere, soon enough. And won't *that* be interesting?

Yes. It probably will. Now they've saved the future.

It's Horror who speaks first, once the ambulance breaks away from the gravity of the arena. She says, with more than a little concern:

'Where's the bomb?'

Valentine gives Inangela one of his looks. He's been looking nervous ever since they came out from the underworld, ever since she pulled him back from the brink of dooming the world, but now he looks troubled rather than apologetic.

'It's still in the Ship,' Inangela says.

'Ship,' repeats Horror. With undertones of, "are you fucking mad?"

'In the control room,' Valentine explains. 'But it's not… it's not dangerous now. Unless someone… you know.'

'Control room,' repeats Horror.

Inangela glances into the back. This bothers her. She knew Horror wouldn't remember much of the Ship, since Horror's future-self was channelling for a lot of the time, but this seems like an almost pathological attempt at denial.

'How much d'you remember?' Inangela asks.

‘You were running up and down a lot,’ notes Horror.

Certain things strike Inangela, at this point. Memories of herself and Horror, of the conversations they’ve had, of the meaningful, drunken glances that have passed between them. Fragments, that’s all. They have something in common, but—

—there’s a discreet ring through her nose, which Inangela finds hauntingly familiar—

—no, it’s gone.

Valentine’s fingers are tapping the plastic of the steering-wheel as the ambulance heads across the fields. Inangela suspects he’s wondering the same thing she’s wondering. How far away should you be from a Ship, when it reaches its apotheosis?

But then he surprises her by saying:

‘Not like it said in the horoscope.’

‘Horoscope…?’ queries Inangela. Who dislikes such things, since they’re an altogether too generic form of divination. (All right. Too *common* is what she means.)

‘ “Once the worst is over, don’t worry”,’ Valentine recites, and not without some bitterness. ‘ “Everything will be solved in one moment of clarity”.’

That sounds wrong, somehow. To Inangela anyway, but maybe it’s just Valentine’s delivery that’s off.

‘That was your horoscope?’ she asks. ‘For today?’

‘Yeah. I dunno. Just stuck in my mind. I was… kind of hyper, earlier on.’

‘ “Everything will be solved in”…?’

‘ “One moment of clarity”.’

Inangela finds herself wrinkling her nose. Something’s definitely not right here. Her skin’s prickling, just like it prickled in the Ship.

‘Are you sure it wasn’t being sarcastic?’ she asks.

‘Sarcastic?’ says Valentine.

5.41 Before the End

In the wholly fictitious War Room of Faction Paradox, in the half-lit secret lair of this most exclusive of criminal organisations, there’d be a great circular map of the town at the centre of the room. It’d light up with tiny violet stars as the electrical faults and the magnetic pulses and the pressure-lines of static spread outwards from the arena, the

arena not being at the map's dead centre, but set off to one side like a human heart.

Glowing lines of neon would mark out the troubled, vaguely off-kilter geometry of Inangela's pentagram, with only one line left incomplete, one point not yet illuminated. One point to pin down the Ship. The walls of this place would be made up of monitor screens, the Faction's masked technicians receiving reports from every civilised nation and using them to chart the movements of the thing-under-the-earth. Ghost-patterns in the pictures. The voices of the future travelling along radio-waves. Secret footage, thought to have been erased or buried a generation ago, broadcast throughout the airwaves by person or persons unknown. All as anticipated, by the Faction at least.

Then there'd be a sudden flash from the arena, a burst of light on the map to make all the other pin-pricks seem pale and ordinary. Not the Ship waking up. Something else, something violent, something almost coronary. And nobody in the operations room would be expecting it, and none of the elders of Faction Paradox would know what it represented, and there'd be panic and there'd be shouting and there'd be calls made to agents and informers in the outside world. And then there'd be darkness, as every TV monitor in the room would shut down.

And none of those great criminal minds in the room would realise what it all meant, or how bad things really were.

5.42 The Bomb

You see…

James Joyce once coined a one-hundred-letter word, *Bababadalgharaghtakamminar-ronnkonnbronntonnerronntuonnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohoohoordenenthu*
to describe a thunderclap so loud that it symbolised the Fall of Eden (his words, more or less). But thunder's easy. Thunder's nothing but a primal force: words were invented to describe things like thunder. It's only elemental.

A nuclear explosion—no, even the suggestion, the implication of a nuclear explosion—is beyond anything primal. It involves, by definition, power on a level that's more fundamental than the most fundamental element and smaller than the smallest unit of thought. It has no parallel in the human world. The potential cost in life is almost irrelevant compared to that. All matter becomes meaningless, all meaning becomes immaterial and suddenly there's no medium in

which experience can even exist.

It takes a hundred letters to describe thunder. To describe the nuclear or the implied-nuclear means staring into the smallest point there is, and stripping the meaning even from *that*. Writers in the 1960s tried to represent the coming horror with a full stop, on the grounds that a nuclear atrocity was thought to be the end-point of all human experience. But even a full stop is too large. Too meaningful. Weighed down with ink and atoms. And besides, there are consequences, especially now.

What else is there, though?

5.43 …

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5.44 As It Happens

‘We have to interrupt here, because we’ve just heard…’

‘We’re going over to our news desk now, where we’ve heard that…

‘Breaking news now…’

‘We’re getting reports that in the last few minutes, an explosion…’

‘Unconfirmed reports claim that the explosion…’

‘…comes in the wake of…’

‘Kirsty, I’m going to have to stop you there, because…’

‘…in the wake of the arrest of…’

‘…in the wake of tonight’s other events…’

‘…explosion on the site of…’

‘We’re getting word from our news desk that…’

‘…the last few minutes…’

‘…explosion…’

‘…material…’

‘…unconfirmed…’

‘…not related to the War…’

‘…may be related to the War…’

‘…unconfirmed…’

‘…unconfirmed…’

‘…as soon as we know more.’

5.45 Fall-Out

The first reports of the explosion claim that it’s nuclear. There’s no real evidence for this, anywhere at all, and truth be told there’s plenty of evidence to the contrary. For one thing, the town where it took place is still there—even now, the news media don’t understand what “nuclear” really entails. To them it just suggests the loudest kind of explosion there is. The idea of a “nuclear” explosion being so closely contained, so that it barely even tears away the barriers around the crater, is patently absurd.

But it’s the suggestion that carries the weight, of course. This is more than a rocket attack, or even a humdrum terror attack. If it were officially-sanctioned and directly related to the War then the world would barely notice, but there’s something distinctly *human* about this. The authorities know, instinctively, that the higher powers didn’t engineer this atrocity—the higher powers know what they’re doing, and this smacks of amateurism. Besides, there are definite casualty figures involved here, or there will be soon. There have to be. Most of the immediate victims are journalists, and the associates of journalists. The media is going to demand justice before long.

In fact only one thing about this great white event says “nuclear,” and that’s the accompanying magnetic pulse. Though some of the news crews outside the perimeter survive, albeit with their skins burned open and irreparable damage to their eyes, no recorded video footage remains. Footage was taken, but it can’t have survived more than a second or two before the burst turned everything on the magnetic tape into a grey, meaningless haze. Electrical systems for miles around were affected at the same time, giving the phrase “media blitz” a whole new level of meaning. Live feeds successfully transmitted *some* material out of the arena in the final moments before the blast, although it’s still to be made public.

Why did the bulletins say “nuclear,” before modifying it to “unconfirmed reports of”? Because the symbols were all in place. The arena was the last resting-place of Tiffany Korta, now rumoured to

have been at ground zero when it happened. Tiffany, whose pronouncements on the joy of terrorism are already putting weapons-grade ideas in the heads of the next generation. Tiffany, who painted her face white in imitation of Faction Paradox, whose fans were only too happy to wear the Faction's masks. Police have already arrested four people with a nuclear Faction connection, haven't they? That should be enough proof for anyone.

5.46 Final Minutes

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: …I don't think I need to explain that this current project has now become… non-viable. I'm sure we don't need to see the market research to know that.

NOD: Is it… is it really that bad? Surely—

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: We're talking about a nuclear… excuse me. We're talking about a terror attack that's widely reported as being nuclear. We can't allow ourselves to be associated with that.

NOD: Is it really anything to do with, with Faction Paradox, though…?

DANZAEL [with irony]: Hardly matters, does it?

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Very true. Any suggestion of "danger" is likely to be problematic, from this point on. Especially if it's masked.

[MOTHER NOD says something under her breath. It sounds apologetic.]

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: We're agreed, then. This image is no longer beneficial.

DANZAEL: And what about Tiffany?

[Some concern among the other members. The name isn't one they like to hear.]

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: I think we can safely assume our contract with Ms. Korta to be… null and void…

DANZAEL [again, irony]: Yes. Wasn't that the whole point?

[More troubled noises from the others.]

CHIEF EXECUTIVE [cautious]: We should… acknowledge, for the sake of future endeavours, that… the project may not have gone according to plan.

DANZAEL: It went exactly to plan. We made her everything we wanted to make her. It's not your fault if you couldn't keep it under control.

[Subtext: it's entirely his fault.]

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: The point remains. This project is no longer viable. We need to consider a change of strategy, in addition to a change in concept. Something a little more… mainstream?

[Murmurs of agreement. One by one, the Executive members begin to remove their masks.]

CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Well. Ladies… gentlemen… for now, I think we could all use some sleep. Shall we disband this assembly until, say, Monday?

5.47 Marriage of Convenience

The terror attack is beginning to reveal itself, piece by piece.

There's the suggestion that a helicopter, a media helicopter no less, crashed at the site in the very last seconds before the white-out. Cause and effect are jumbled, especially since the footage is out of sequence and the event has so many doppelgangers. The helicopter was certainly filmed, pre-blast, experiencing difficulties in the air over the arena. Later today, news presenters will be asking technical experts whether the presence of radioactive (but not necessarily nuclear) materials at the site could have jammed the helicopter's systems, and the answer will always be "no" but once again the focus is there.

The word "nuclear" won't go away, however absurd the thought may seem, because the phrase "no evidence that the attack was nuclear" still has the word *nuclear* as its focus and makes the meaning stronger. Footage is starting to appear, extracts from the live feeds. The world starts to build up a picture of the ring around the crater, despite the big cultural bullet-hole in its heart.

More significant is the question of whether the crash could have been the direct cause of the explosion. Well, wouldn't it make sense? The attack was obviously more than just a "normal" bomb, or why else would everyone be so affected by it? Consider: a helicopter driven out of control, possibly by radiation despite the expert testimony, crash-landing at a site where terrorists had *already* planted an explosive device and setting it off prematurely. One detonation causing another. A unique collision, a coming-together that seems almost cosy, of the media and the War.

In this version of the mythology, whether the terrorists intended to trigger the bomb or not is irrelevant. It was inevitable something like this would happen, that the nuclear, quasi-nuclear, radioactive or possibly radioactive explosion would take place. If you'd read the media properly, you would've seen it coming.

5.48 The Guilty Party

The video footage of the arrest, circulated second-hand from a local TV network and covered in static crackle that pleasantly suggests "radiation poisoning," shows the arch-criminals known as the Faction Four being led out of the door of their lair and manhandled into the back of a police van. If anyone still believes in the existence of Faction Paradox as a real-life SPECTRE-style criminal organisation, this should put the gravestone on it once and for all.

Their headquarters is a narrow, dilapidated building on a street that's too ordinary to even come across as ingenious camouflage. The Four themselves, when they're bundled out into the half-light, are less impressive still. Appropriately their heads are covered in hoods, so the Faction remains masked even now, but these masks are improvised: a plastic bag, a pullover, a pillow-case and a shredded piece of bedsheet. There are no eye-holes, and the prisoners' hands are kept firmly behind their backs, so they trip and tumble down the one big step to the pavement. Their clothes aren't uniforms. They wear no symbols. Looking at the footage without voice-over, all you'd know for sure is that they must have done something truly appalling. You can tell because the police aren't making any body-contact with them at all, except for the occasional guiding shove. The arresting officers are, as is traditional, slightly less aggressive towards the one woman in the group. The popular press is already preparing to give her the nickname of "the ice-queen."

On most channels, the footage cuts away once the Four have been shut into the back of the van. To an interview with one of the officers, or an expert from the counter-terrorism divisions. Most of the interviewees tell the same story. The Faction was a splinter-group (oh, how the cameras love the phrase "splinter group") created after the fall of the old CRS, or SRC, or RCS. As far as anyone's aware it consists, or consisted, of exactly four core members—though the question of why a bugging campaign should target such an inadequate group isn't raised. A series of recorded conversations, in addition to material found inside the Faction "safe-house," reveals the Four had an interest in obtaining uranium. Totemic or otherwise.

5.49 The Rest of the Answers Given by the Police

Yes, the group was in contact with an underworld supplier. No, we

don't believe that supplier was reliable. Yes, the Faction possibly created the arena bomb. No, it definitely wasn't nuclear. Yes, we're definitely sure. Yes, it's likely that their supplier ripped them off and provided them with non-nuclear material. Yes, again, we're sure. No, they couldn't possibly have afforded real weapons-grade material, even if it somehow found its way to a town like this. Yes, this does indeed prove that these people were amateurs who had no idea what they were doing.

Yes, it's true, there is a chance… just a faint chance… that the bomb *could* have been radioactive, but it could only have been a very poor "dirty bomb" at best. Yes, every precaution is being taken. Yes, that's why the area's being sealed. No, the locals don't have to worry. No. No they don't. No, they really, really don't.

No… no, we couldn't have stopped the bomb, because we were waiting for the Four to give away the identity of their field agent by telephone. Yes, field agent. Yes, he was just a Faction stooge. Yes, he probably didn't even know what he was doing, but we couldn't do anything until there was more information. No, we couldn't get the truth about the bomber out of the prisoners in time.

Yes, the agent may have escaped the blast. Yes, we know his name now. Yes, this proves the need for more stringent security measures in today's world, and no, there's nothing more to say.

No.

No, everything's all right now.

No.

5.50 Collateral

All this complexity, all this human meaning. Call it a Ship, or call it the culture, or call it something that intersects with humanity as it chooses. You can even call it the future, since it seems—seemed—so inevitable that it'd wake up sooner or later, in whatever town or city or nation. Call it what you like, it hasn't moved since the explosion.

A Ship does, as Valentine half-expected, suffer terrible contractions when it's damaged from the inside. But these contractions are slow and subtle. The ground doesn't crack open and pour post-nuclear venom out into the world, and though history may buckle it's hardly a question of human casualties.

The Executive takes off its collective mask. The anchorpersons find words difficult to come by. Across the world, in locations still unconnected by simple geography, the aftershock manifests itself in

memos and restrictions. Even as the politicians re-draft their speeches, the broadcasters, the scene-shifters, the writers, the would-be artists, the executives and the Executives begin to pull away from the edge, to curb what might be called their "worst excesses," to hold back out of pure terror. Their ability to take new risks and think new thoughts is diminished, for fear that they'll make it happen again, or perhaps bring on something even worse. Words vanish from the English language. Certain ideas become unspeakable. The world becomes less complex, and as it becomes less complex the probability of anything this remarkable taking place again is reduced. And so on and so on, until all things are equally flat and secure and no thought can be tolerated at all.

The explosion is, indeed, the crucible. But not all initiations are successful. That thing under the ground, Ship or culture or just human experience tied up in one great knot: there's a compulsion to wake it up, in every living thing that uses words or symbols to try to comprehend the world. There's a compulsion to wake it up in the same way that there's a compulsion to be close to the War, because we're primed for complexity over reason and we just can't help it. And yet… there's the compulsion to resist it, too. To get too close to it is to leave behind the flesh and the blood, to acknowledge that it's greater than any one body or life, and bodies are all we know. It's a self-destructive creature, this. It calls to the human instincts to wake it, but by its very presence it urges the human instincts to destroy it, or at least to leave it buried. So that we can stay ignorant and ordinary, nothing but bodies, repeating the same thoughts and actions over and over again but never, ever doing anything to risk becoming something greater. Maybe that's the most fundamental war there is, even more so than the War. The war to make us all *homo imago*.

The decision's made in the crucible. There'll be other crucibles, as other towns and other parts of the world begin to wake up, but the trouble is… the trouble is that every failed initiation makes it more likely that the next one will fail, as well. The broadcasters, the scene-shifters, the writers, the would-be artists, the executives and the Executives will see to that.

5.51 The Loose End

Gareth "Foxy" Taylor rolls himself across the hotel forecourt, trying to avoid the attentions of a sun doing its best to get on his nerves as well as into his eyes, perspiration sticking his jacket to his shirt and his shirt to his pudgy torso. It's sheer fatigue that's dragging him down now. He's been up for nearly twenty-four hours and he's carrying

eight different columns in his head.

An hour and a half ago, he started making his way towards the arena. An hour ago, he gave up after being thrown out of a taxi by a driver who recognised him and objected to his column on heavy metal bands (and the homosexuality thereof). Since then he's been slowly ambling back to his hotel, often stopping to get his breath back or to try to get the last residue of alcohol and cheap snacks out of his bloodstream.

The hotel's a big, faceless, Lego-building in the '60s style, walling in the forecourt on three sides. The sun's hauling itself up over the far side of the building, so the edge of the roof is sharpening the light into a razor's-edge and making the flagstones bleed white. Nobody else around. As far as Gareth's concerned, the night's excitement is over. Time to wrap things up, get some notes down, get some sleep.

Oh, wait a minute. There's one other human figure in the forecourt, standing dead ahead, but the light's so fierce on the paving-slabs around her that she looks fuzzy at the edges. She flickers as he squints, like a badly-tuned-in TV channel. Looking good, though. Nice figure, because here in the real world Gareth's happy to accept the kind of hips that he'd never, ever tolerate on music television.

He notices the clothes before he notices the face. The style rings bells straight away. Next he spots the fake tan, but since he's only been told about the interview footage of the previous few hours and hasn't personally seen it, the dreadlocks mean nothing to him.

He thinks: fan. Given what he's said about Ms. Korta in the last few weeks, the girl's probably going to give him an earful, the way whining, obsessive teenagers always do.

He's less than ten feet away from her when the girl's face finally resolves itself out of the daylight.

5.52 Remembrance

The name of Valentine Bregman is already familiar to the media. More familiar than it is to many people who know him, in fact, given its constant repetition over channels too obscure to name, count or classify. Suffice to say he's "wanted in connection with."

The police force which breaks into the four-room paperback-splendour of his flat doesn't even come heavily armed—that's how confident it is that he won't be there. The TV crews at the scene, those who survived the crucible, already know about the stolen ambulance and are more than aware Mr. Bregman has spent some time posing as a member of the emergency services. This time the raid on the

conspirator's home is caught on camera, as are the pale, news-shocked images of neighbours from other floors of the building.

It surprises nobody that he was a bit of a loner who kept himself to himself and couldn't maintain a long-term relationship, but the greatest single piece of testimony comes from a man on the top floor who used to keep attack-dogs as pets. Used to keep because as of this morning, he only owns one. He has, had, a habit of allowing the dogs to run free outside the building in the early hours, when nobody was around to complain about them dumping into the gutters or chasing each other up the stairwells.

It transpires that earlier this morning, before his date with history and subsequent demonisation, Mr. Bregman smashed one of the animals' heads in for no given reason. Animals are implicate humans. You can tell a lot about somebody from the way he treats animals.

It's easy to sympathise with the dogs' owner. He's lazy-eyed and slack-jawed and looks as if his whole body's attempting to become one enormous double chin, but even so you just know he's going to start crying as soon as he's off-camera. He's lost one of his pets. Anyone can relate to something like that.

5.53 War Statistics

"Foxy" has stopped dead in the hotel forecourt. It's obvious, now, that the girl's deliberately standing in his way. She hasn't spoken, she hasn't moved to block him, but he's a good hack so he knows a territorial challenge when he sees one.

Even at this distance, the sun's making it hard for him to focus on the girl's face. Certain things are quite striking, though, and it's these that have caused him to stop in his tracks. The girl's eyes, big and wide and surrounded by thick black lines of make-up. The angle of her head, shockingly reminiscent of… oh, you know… that video, the one with all the dancers. The diamond-stud in the forehead.

So what's his first thought?

Lookalike.

Natch. Journalists are never, ever confronted head-on by their symbiotic partners in showbusiness, at least not physically. If a star's unhappy, it's the job of her management to sort things out, prodding the hack's employers with vaguely-defined threats of legal action or—more commonly—with suggestions that certain people won't be getting any more free drinks and hard exclusives. No modern-day icon makes ritual challenges face-to-face. And on a night like this? The real Tiffany Korta would hardly be found here, appearing out of nowhere

in full stage-gear. Besides which, this is bound to be a day for wannabes. It's earlier than "Foxy" might have expected, but the freaks are guaranteed to be crawling out of the cracks in the pavement before long. Coming up from under the ground: good imagery, that. Does the real Tiffany even look like this, anyway? The eyes are right, granted, but everything else looks… off.

It must occur to him, if only for a moment, that he might be at risk. An obsessive fan lookalike, dressed in the clothes and ceremonial signs of her mentor, is a dangerous person on the day the mentor in question goes over the edge. Then again, he's a big man and he knows he can look after himself in a fight. What's a teenage wannabe going to do to him, scratch his eyes out?

He starts moving again. Straight ahead. Puts his head down like a charging animal. He's determined to make *her* step aside, the daft little cow.

'D'you know why I wanted to start this war?' says the girl.

The voice is, admittedly, perfect. It distracts him, and forces him to stop again. He once more finds himself making eye-contact with her, which isn't really what he wants.

'What?' he ends up saying.

'D'you know why I wanted to start this war?' the girl repeats. Gareth tries to make sense of this, even as he tries to work out whether he should step around her or just push her out of his path. War? Does she mean *the* War? Doesn't really matter if she—

'No,' he tells her, to kill time until he figures out what else to say.

—does or doesn't, seeing as she's obviously lost her mind, but if she doesn't then is this something to do with what's been happening in the last few hours? Or what?

'To make sure people like you aren't remembered when you die,' the girl explains, and she looks positively beautific as she says it.

The knife seems to unfold from the seams of her clothing. It only twists once after she drives it up under his ribcage, because she's not a sadist and this isn't really a vengeance killing.

5.54 Cut

He imagines the front page of today's paper, and hopes his body will be found in time to catch the last print run. He sees his own image there on the cover of the Sun, under the black "mourning" masthead that's usually only called into service after the death of royalty or a particularly noteworthy terror attack. He imagines them using the only file photo of

himself he's ever liked, the one where his smile is just as Buddha-like as the girl's, the one where he doesn't look even remotely smug or leering or hostile. Just at peace with the world, happy in his profession. The headline is a piece of cake, of course: FOXY HUNTED. Is the masthead thing going to far? No, probably not. The editors would understand. One of their own flesh and blood has died, after all, and…

…no, of course those aren't his last thoughts. He's dying on a forecourt with a kitchen-knife ripping his heart open. He doesn't give a shit what the consequences will be, or what people are going to think tomorrow, and if his last thoughts are in any way sentimental then they're going to concern his wife and his seven-year-old child.

Of course. He had—still has, for the next few seconds—a wife and a seven-year-old child. He also influenced the thoughts and ideals of up to six-million people every day. Several hundred of them in this town. Once, during a television appearance, he made Inangela Marrero laugh (however guiltily) with a joke about the way the world would be run if politicians were celebrity chefs and vice-versa. His views on foreigners, and especially foreign-language movies, made Valentine Bregman very angry and were widely quoted in pubs as reasons to stay isolationist. His loud, aggressive views on women's fashion helped one man in the tenements on the west side of town convince himself that forcing himself on an ex-girlfriend didn't count as rape.

He knew the risks.

Is it really worth pointing out that he won't make it onto the cover of tomorrow's Sun? Not that he'll be forgotten. There'll be a whole half-page obituary on page nine, and his comrades will remember him as one of the "great characters" of their profession. Two days later they'll print his last ever column, worked together out of the notes found in his jacket at the time of his death, and the reference to Kirsten from Girl Party among his observations on the Tiffany Korta fiasco will puzzle many but amuse others.

5.55 The White Machine

More superstitions of the ambulance crews. More legends of the night shift.

Anything can be cursed, because curses are easy to come by, that close to the mortuary. Certain streets can be cursed. Certain routes back to the casualty department can be cursed, which is why drivers occasionally find themselves taking the long road, even if there's someone in the back possibly breathing his or her last.

But most of all, ambulances can be cursed. There are sick

ambulances just like there are sick buildings, to be avoided by any crewman who knows the truth. Any crewman who can look the management in the face and say, with all apparent sincerity: 'Couldn't get it to start. Probably the spark plugs. I took one of the others out instead, is that okay?'

The ambulance currently parked out in front of the hospital is the king of all sick vehicles, a thing of such importance and such horror that the crews know they'll never see its like again. It's not much to look at, standing alone on the tarmac with one corner crushed by an unknown impact, one fender scorched by fire and all four of its wheels weighed down with mud. But you can tell, in these last few minutes before the police arrive to examine it, that the crewmen know what it is.

Nobody had any reason to pay attention to the ambulance, when it first rolled into the forecourt. Although it had gone missing several hours earlier, there were far too many casualties coming in from the crucible for the hospital staff to notice its sudden re-appearance. By the time someone asked why it happened to be parked in such an awkward place, the driver was long gone. There was just the patient. One teenage girl, wearing a plastic mask which nobody had thought to remove.

She's dead now. The staff who examined her, before somebody realised just which ambulance this was, concluded she'd died between ten and fifteen minutes earlier.

5.56 The Black Machine

Sun's up. Sun's up over a certain road not that far from the arena, where the House of Marrero still lies half-cocked across one side of the roadway, so the morning traffic (such as it is, considering so many people are using the radiation-panic as an excuse to avoid commuting) has to swerve grumpily in order to avoid it.

No security for the House now. No flecks of blood around it to ward off the attentions of the outside world, and there's bound to be a tow-truck along before nine to remove the carcass. "Carcass" being a well-chosen word, suggesting something not-quite-whole, since the body of the House of Marrero is already on fire. One broken window to mark the point where the burning newspaper-brand was thrown onto the one leather seat in the back. Set alight by adolescent or adolescents unknown, and so the cycle continues. It couldn't really have ended any other way.

The arsonist is nowhere in sight, but the fire's a slow one, peeling

off the layers of paint across the rear of the fallen House and not putting the engine in jeopardy *just* yet. The flames have only become visible to the outside world in the last few moments, now that sunlight's starting to stretch itself over the landscape. It gives the impression that the sunlight itself has started the House smouldering.

This is, or was, a night creature. It has no place in the daytime, especially not on the first morning of a world like this one.

5.57 The Symbol at the Stopover

Here's the one the authorities will find interesting. It's not the only vandalised speed-camera in town by any means, but the investigators have no reason to look for the less obvious patterns, so for them this is all that matters.

Because this particular photo shows the ambulance, the ambulance known to have transported the bomb, mere minutes after the detonation.

Strange by anybody's standards, though. The photograph was taken on the road that leads out of a stopover on the north edge of town, just beyond the fuel-pumps, the parking-spaces and the signboards advertising every snackfood known to man or motorist. And yet the scene's barely visible, mostly because of the disturbed figure-eight shape that's been daubed across the lens.

In the background you can see the ambulance, heading back into town rather than taking the chance to escape. Which is strange in itself. Before the hospital its last positive sighting was outside the arena, so the instinct which caused the driver to come all the way here is difficult to comprehend. But then, everything about "his kind" is difficult to comprehend.

There's another interesting detail to this picture. There's a girl, to the right of the image, also partly-obscured by the paint smear but standing on the edge of the pavement in front of the camera: standing looking straight up at the lens. Pale-faced and dark-eyed, black hair in a sweat-mane around her head, body squeezed into a bustier and desperately in need of a coat to finish the ensemble. The look on her face, as even the most unsentimental observer would be able to tell, says, "Thank God that's finished." There's no joy there, though. No sense of satisfaction. You get the feeling she's doing this just to get it over with, so she *knows*—in a way teenagers so rarely do—this act of vandalism achieves nothing.

The conclusion is obvious. The girl and the ambulance are unconnected. The girl daubed the speed camera with paint, probably

as some kind of dare, and the ambulance just happened to speed past at the same time. Capturing her on film. Making her part of something much, much bigger, something terrible and newsworthy, something she can't possibly have anticipated. The poor little chubby-faced thing.

5.58 Imaginary Conversation

…held by imaginary iterations. It almost certainly never really happened this way, in any meaningful sense, but let's suppose it took place on board the Ship in the final moments before the explosion. As a matter of fact, let's suppose the conversation was created by the Ship, conceived and generated by its enormous cultural processing-power. One of the conversationalists is a projection of the future—the other is simply an icon, with no mass in the real world at all. Suppose they're looking out of one of the portholes, watching the world outside go to Hell as the Ship prepares to reveal itself.

'So what *are* you, anyway?' Tiffany asks.

Future-Horror shrugs non-committally, and if you think the real Horror knows how to shrug non-committally then just wait until you see a version who's had years more practice.

'I was the only one who could come back,' she says.

'Yeah, I know that,' says Tiffany. 'Why?'

' 'Cos I'm great,' says future-Horror.

'Seriously!' giggles Tiffany. In the way that sixteen-year-old boys always found so endearing, when she had a proper, corporeal body with proper, corporeal breasts.

'I'm good at projecting,' Horror says, simply.

'Uh-huh. You're just not human, are you?'

Future-Horror gives her a meaningful look. Just for one frame out of the twenty-five that make up this second of time, Horror's face isn't there. Underneath, she isn't Horror or future-Horror at all. She's something a lot more straightforward, with a lot less awkward details, drawn in thick black lines of ink and lovingly coloured by a CGI animation department. Something with a snout, and a band of black across its face, and a trademark ring through its nostrils.

Just for one frame, that is. It's what they call subliminal advertising.

'You know how you used to worry about one of your doppelgangers being smarter than you?' Horror asks.

'More *complex* than me,' says Tiffany, pretending to get huffy about it.

‘It’s like that,’ Horror tells her. ‘Y’know. Corporations have been more complex than people for years.’

‘You look like a fucking racoon!’ laughs Tiffany. Who’s allowed to swear now.

‘Yeah, well. It’s the corporate logo. You know how gods are meant to dress up as people sometimes, just to feel what it’s like being a person? It’s like that. We get that.’

‘Oh, suuure,’ says Tiffany. ‘You just wanted a hug, huh?’

‘Okay, so it’s also good for market research,’ future-Horror admits. ‘This time round I was a slacker. There’s a big slacker market for chocolate right now. Look… is this Ship going to take off, or not?’

‘Uh,’ says Tiffany. ‘I really don’t think we’re going to make it this time.’

5.59 Escape

Nearly six o’clock. This shift is ending.

You hear a lot of people talk about “the banality of evil,” but they don’t usually mention the evil of banality. George Orwell once said that if you wanted to know the future, just *imagine* a boot stamping on a human face… forever. But the truth’s even more insidious, and frankly even less pleasant. You don’t need torture-chambers or nightsticks or Room 101s. Besides, in a world run by Nazis you can at least imagine a different kind of future. You want to put a block on humanity, for the rest of time? Easy. Just take a society that’s more medium than flesh, that’s more about meaning than about bodies (and most societies are going to end up that way sooner or later: it’s only human). Tyranny is simple. All you have to do is introduce a sense of decorum, of demographic correctness, of “appropriateness” and “good taste” which that society’s inhabitants will never, ever be able to escape.

Wait until there’s a disaster. Wait until the next terror attack hits your neighbourhood, or the next War starts and kills a few people who qualify as Us rather than Them. Wait until you see the pop stars and the minor celebrities, the boy-bands and girl-bands and the Executive-controlled classes, the reporters and the hacks and the big names who base every opinion they have on the carefully-assembled profiles of their target audiences. Wait until you hear them sing their song—their wailing, meaningless, empty-eyed, fake-soul song of regret for all those who died and all those whose families suffered in “the tragedy.” Wait until you hear the lyrics of angels weeping in Heaven and children of all nations coming together in a time of peace, sung even

as the War goes on and the Executives and higher powers nod their heads in approval.

Imagine that song… forever.

That's the future. No boots required.

This wasn't a very successful initiation. Inangela's more than aware of that, although "initiation" suggests (by its very nature) making a definite choice, and she's not at all sure whether she or anybody else consciously chose anything. This is something we know, from every movie we've seen and every heroic novel we've ever read. There has to be a moment of decision, in which the good can prove themselves good. We're not primed to think that the weight of human inertia will be enough to drag us back. Or that one moment of decision, rather than a lifetime, might not be enough.

Not a very successful initiation. More successful as a ritual in its own right, perhaps, given that it certainly got results. Enough to remind you what meaning really means. We might confidently predict Inangela will be attempting another summoning, soon, though inertia remains the enemy. The next campaign to wake the world will be even less likely to succeed, we already know that. Just take it as read that anyone who uses the word "inappropriate" is intrinsically evil. Their words define the world, but they can't speak for fear of alienating a single voter or follower or consumer, until all human meaning becomes a snake eating its own tail.

For now, if nothing else, there's at least the option of trying again. There's at least some meaning left in the world. At least some room to manoeuvre, and the possibility of speech even if there's a reduced possibility that anyone will hear. It's still down there, after all. It may have been crippled, but its bulk still exists, buried under the skin. It'll always be there. As long as there's human understanding that it *might* be there, it'll be there. Waiting to repair itself. Waiting to be dragged to the surface. Moving in the depths of all human experience, intersecting with every human lifetime.

This Ship will never leave without us. This town will never let us go.

Isn't that the main thing?

About the Author

Lawrence Miles has now written eight novels, although he's been known to describe *This Town Will Never Let Us Go* as "arguably the first one that counts." As the creator of Faction Paradox, his duties have included writing the Faction series for Image Comics and devising *The Book of the War* (typical critics' assessment: "remarkable"). He's currently developing an unforeseen interest in stage magic, and he's worked out a way of drastically improving the classic Box of Pain trick if anybody's interested. He lives and works within travelcard-distance of London.

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